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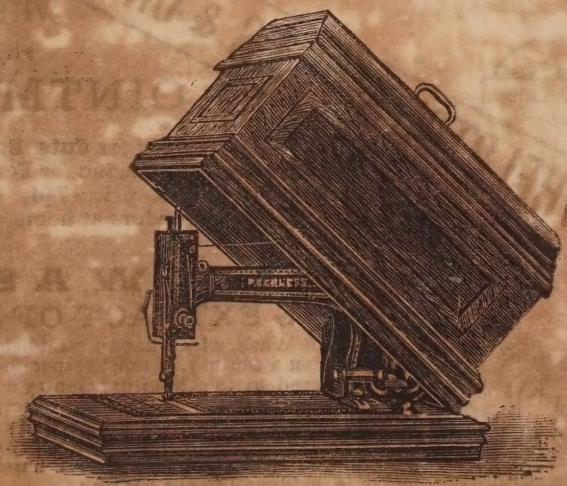

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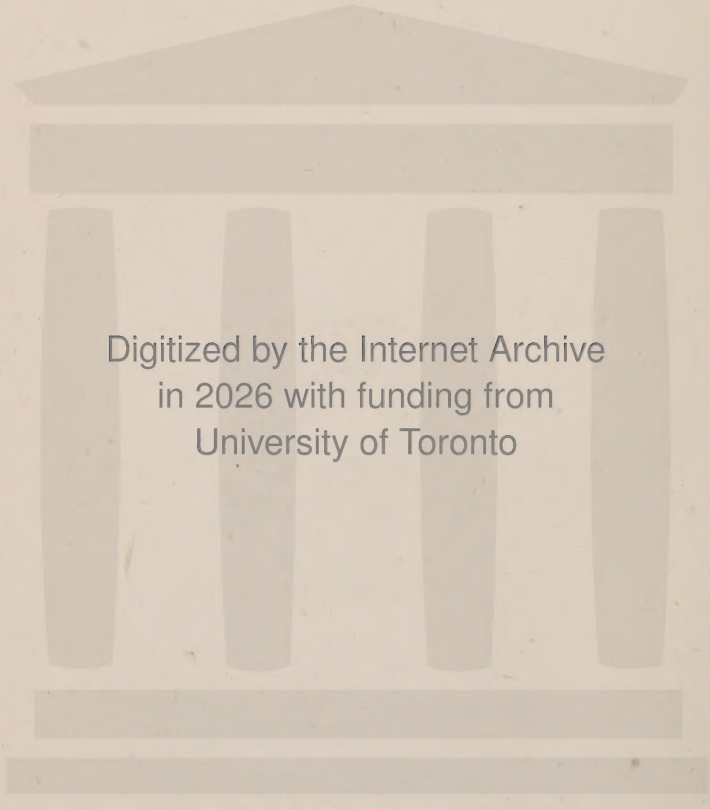
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED,

IN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF A GREAT KINDNESS

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THE MYSTERY OF MIRBRIDGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE RECTORY.

SPRINGTIME in England—whatever may be said to its discredit—is, after all, our best time. It may set in with its usual severity, but, like the parrot when it nips its mistress, its bite has a something caressing in it. Even the people that go abroad to avoid 'that hateful east wind' of ours pine to be at home again when the bullfinch begins his song. 'Oh, life in England now that April's there,' sings the poet in Italy as he sees in imagination, as Wordsworth saw, the daffodils, 'the buttercups, the little children's dower,' and compares them, to its disadvantage, with the 'gaudy melon flower.' What the maiden dying of consumption, and the old man dying of old age, alike desire to see once more before they go, is, above all other sights, the springtime, as it comes too slowly up their way. The spectacle of Nature renewing her youth and strength and beauty is grateful to everyone, whether they recognise what it is that charms them or no.

The Reverend Percival Thorne, walking in his Rectory garden this April morning before breakfast, recognises it well enough. His lot had long been cast in a manufacturing town, where the changes of the seasons were marked chiefly by the use or disuse of fires in the grates, or by the difference of the viands on the table, and he vastly prefers his country Rectory to Stoketon.

'I seem to breathe freely for the first time these ten years,' he observed to his wife on his first arrival at Mirbridge, and he is sniffing the fresh odours that arise from the fields and streams around him now as though he could never inhale enough of them. His present lines, in comparison with his old ones, have certainly fallen in a pleasant place.

The Rectory is a house of considerable size, standing on a knoll, with a well-wooded hill behind it, that shields it from north and east; around it runs a veranda, from which, in summer time, so charming a view is afforded, that it often tempts certain of its indwellers to remain at home, and take the loveliness of neighbouring but more distant landscapes upon trust, from hearsay, rather than stir from their chairs.

The garden is large and very picturesque, being interspersed with huge lichen-covered boulders (which have rolled down years ago from the hill behind) and ancient trees, whose still leafless boughs are moss-covered like the antlers of a stag. It is skirted by an unseen high road, sunk between deep banks, on the other side of which is a meadow, intersected by the Mir, at present a bright, sparkling stream, full of high spirits indeed, yet respectful of its banks, but which, a month earlier, when the snow from the hills begins to melt, is given to spread itself to right and left, till it looks more like a lake than a river. To the west the valley narrows; the stream is there pent up between two walls of rock, and never ceases, even in the driest weather, to make complaint of its imprisonment. Beyond this gorge rises a range of hills, almost large enough to be called mountains, green, save when capped by snow, to their very summits. On the south the landscape is shut in by low-lying woods which, even in summer-time, do not reach the spire of the village church, nor the scarcely less aspiring turrets of the mansion of the Squire. As fine a home-view as even in England, so rich in similar scenes that to the very alien who looks upon them it seems almost 'home,' was ever beheld from Rectory garden.

On his favourite walk, between the apple-tree and the box-wood hedge, the Rector paces up and down—a man of sixty or more, but upright as a dart, and bright-eyed as a star. It is not always thus with him, for the reverend gentleman, in common with most of his clerical brethren in these times, has cause enough for depression; but the pure air and bright sunshine have for the moment driven sombre thoughts away. Moreover, truth to say, he has another reason for his unwonted light-heartedness in a certain day-dream in which he has been indulging—not for the first time.

It is broken by a clapping of hands from the veranda and a musical cry of 'Pa—pa, pa—pa!' which awakes the echoes like the notes of a key-bugle; the very hills, though in gentlest tones, seem to be calling for him.

'If it could only be,' he murmurs to himself, with a half-sigh; 'yet why should it not be?' and he leisurely obeys the summons.

In the veranda which frames her charming little figure, as though it were a picture, stands the Rector's second daughter,

Lucy: her cheeks, which have naturally a bright, though delicate colour, are pale; her dark-brown hair is short as that of a boy, for it is only a few weeks since it began to grow, after a dangerous illness, in which the whole silken harvest of it had to be sheared away. She is quite convalescent now, and her sweet looks are rather improved than otherwise, or so it appears to her fond parent, by the ordeal which she has gone through. She is one of those girls whose charms satisfy us so completely that we think they can never change for the better, yet on whom every change seems to confer new beauties; not that Lucy Thorne is really beautiful in an artistic sense, but only winsome and attractive in the highest degree. Six months ago the Rector could not have conceived to himself how he could have loved a daughter more; but at that time she had been almost lost to him, and by God's mercy had been given back to his arms, at the very edge of the grave. It is the first time since last autumn that she has 'bugled' to him, as she calls it, a music he had never thought to hear again; and at the sound of it the selfish tears start to his eyes, because his darling is with him still, and exposed to all earthly snares and woes, and not a saint in heaven. It is the case with even the best of us; though we know that if our dear ones die they

> 'In a city glorious,
> A great and distant city,
> Have bought a mansion incorruptible,
> Would they could have stayed with us!'

is still our cry.

'This is very shocking!' cries the fairy figure, shaking a reproving finger at her parent as he toils up the sloping sward to the veranda. 'To be late on the first morning that his daughter has come down to breakfast.'

'You very wicked and abominable girl!' returns the Rector, whose humour it is to load with the most severe reproaches the child who in his eyes is faultless, and whom he is secretly conscious of having done his best to spoil, 'how dare you say so? Why, your mother and I have been waiting for you, and for Clara,' he adds with precipitancy (like one who has been nearly forgetting himself, or, rather, somebody else), 'these three-quarters of an hour. Where on earth, my dear'—this to his wife, who is sitting at the breakfast-table superintending the tea-urn—'did this very shameless and disrespectful young person acquire her habit of mendacity?'

'You had better both come in and shut the window,' returns the lady of the house, without condescending to take the least notice of this grave question of morals. 'It is very unwise of you, Percy, to go out so early without an overcoat; and if I had not insisted upon the precaution—would you believe it?—that

girl of yours, only just recovering from her illness, would have gone without a shawl to call you in.'

'Don't call her *my* girl,' said the Rector, looking at the delinquent as if she were some toothsome dainty, which he would prefer to anything on the well-spread table in the way of eating, and shaking his handsome head with a great show of indignation; 'she is an unworthy minx, and the plague of our lives —— Cut me some ham, you witch—fat and very thin, as your father loves it, though I dare say you have forgotten all about his likes and dislikes. There is certainly nothing like the atmosphere of a sick-room for increasing natural selfishness.'

'I wish you'd eat your toast while it's hot, my dear,' observed Mrs. Thorne drily. She did not disapprove of her husband's affectionate banter of Lucy, and much less was she jealous of it, for she was well aware that there was someone in the world whom the Rector loved still better than his younger daughter, but she always discouraged it, for it sometimes gave offence in other quarters. To keep the peace, and to cause others to do so, was good Mrs. Thorne's mission, which had earned for her the gratitude of her family and the title of 'The Special Constable.'

She had prejudices and preferences of her own, no doubt; but she never showed them, except, indeed, as respected the Rector, whom she worshipped without much concealment. She was his junior by only a few years, but looked much younger; not a wrinkle had the 'envious crow' planted on her plump and comely cheek; her brow only showed signs of care, but it was care for others, not for herself, and they had no resemblance to a frown. Thirty years ago she had been the handsomest of Lancashire lasses; and as a matron she still bore away the bell. Of this, however, I believe she was unconscious. It was natural to her to dress with taste, but she gave far less thought to her whole attire than to the choice of a ribbon, or a rose, to be worn by one of her girls. Her manner was very quiet, and she spoke but little; always, however, as sensibly as gently, and nothing escaped her eye.

'Where is the Duchess?' inquired the Rector presently. 'Her Grace is less punctual even than usual.'

'Clara has been up some time,' replied Mrs. Thorne, confining herself to the defence of her offspring, without taking notice of the high rank accorded to her.

'It's a great day, you know, papa, and preparations must be made accordingly,' said Lucy slily; 'there are three degrees of comparison in a young lady's attire: Hightems, Tightems, and Scrub! With Clara this morning it is Hightems.'

'And with you, you minx? But you need not tell me; I can see by your waspish waist that it is Tightems.'

'What a libel! Put your finger into my waistbelt. Your thumb, if you like—I insist upon it. Now apologize.'

'It is elastic,' said the Rector gravely. 'I had thought it was leather.'

'It *is* leather!' exclaimed Lucy indignantly.

'Come, I had you there,' observed the Rector complacently. 'She really thought I was in earnest. Please to score one for me, Amy, will you, my dear, in case I should forget it?'

'You won't forget it,' cried Lucy, compelled, though conscious of defeat, to join in her father's mirth. 'It will be your only victory.'

'You have put it down, my dear Amy, have you?' reiterated the Rector, ignoring his daughter's sarcasm; 'because it's important.'

'My dear Percy, how can you be so silly?' exclaimed his wife reprovingly; 'I don't know which of you two is the greatest baby.'

At this moment the door opened; there was a rustling of some stiff material, of I know not what sort, but presumably not canvas, and in sailed a majestic young woman. At the sight of her, the faces of the two delinquents assumed that unnatural gravity—in his case the supposititious child of some irregular Greek verb—which overspreads the schoolboy's countenance on the sudden appearance of the pedagogue, and, save that the Rector murmured 'Dr. Busby,' under his breath, the atmosphere of the breakfast-room at once lost its levity.

Clara Thorne was a magnificent young woman, whom no one dreamt of calling a girl, though in the eyes of the law she was still an infant. She stood five feet ten in her—well, without her—shoes; and, unlike most young ladies of the same height and age, had no resemblance to a Maypole. Her well-developed figure was, for the present, faultless. Her complexion was exquisitely delicate, soft, and pure as cream, with the least touch of pink showing through it. Her hair, of much lighter brown than her sister's, was luxuriant and very long. There was a rumour—unsupported, however, by any trustworthy evidence—that she could sit upon it. Her eyes were gray and full of grave intelligence. She was chary of her smiles, which, moreover, were always reserved for the individual, not wasted on the public like mere largesse; but when she did smile, one felt one had earned something—the approbation of royalty. In her appearance, her manners, her movements she was indeed queen-like; no other word could express it, and she felt—for, indeed, though she had neither land nor wealth, all about her were her subjects—every inch a queen. If some Lord of Burleigh had won her, 'the burthen of an honour to which she was not born' would never have incommoded her. Her case, indeed, was quite

the contrary of that of the lady of the ballad ; her nature was too ample and majestic for her modest surroundings. Had they been more humble, it would have only made the disproportion the greater, not detracted from her supremacy. Independence of character, based upon consciousness of natural superiority, is rare in women ; and, when it exists, it involves certain drawbacks, and Clara Thorne was not without them.

With the stateliness of a three-decker she made the circuit of the breakfast-room, touching, as it were, at its three ports, and saluting each in a different fashion. Her mother she kissed affectionately, bestowed on Lucy a patronizing pat upon the head, and gravely pressed her lips, as though affixing a seal to some legal document, to her father's forehead.

'Have the letters come ?' she inquired.

'The Duchess,' *alias* 'Juno,' *alias* 'Dr. Busby,' for by all these titles she was known, though never addressed, in the family circle, was generally late for prayers, often for breakfast, but rarely for the postman. Correspondence always interested her. She took a greater interest in the world outside than did her parents or her sister ; but on the present occasion a note of unusual concern pervaded her dulcet tones.

'It is nearly time for them, my dear,' responded Mrs. Thorne apologetically. 'Poor Saunders has a long round to make, and the new parcels post, though very convenient, delays him sadly.'

'He should get a tricycle,' observed Clara severely.

'I wonder that has not struck him,' remarked the Rector, with sly simplicity. 'It would not cost him above twelve or thirteen pounds at most.'

'If there is any difficulty about the cost,' continued Clara, 'the Government, of course, would defray it.'

'No doubt.'

'Then why do you not write to the Postmaster-General, papa ?'

This was carrying the war into the enemy's country, indeed. The Rector had not been able to resist his little sarcasm, at which his wife had shaken her head in disapproval behind the urn, and Lucy had bitten her lip to restrain the tell-tale mirth ; and now, without allies he had evoked an adversary with whom he was wholly unequal to deal.

'But what would Saunders do with his tricycle when he got to the Bridge Hill, my dear Clara ?' he inquired, with gentle conciliation.

'He would lead it,' was the uncompromising rejoinder.

To most people who knew the Bridge Hill—it could be seen from the veranda rising very steeply to the height of five hundred feet—and also Saunders, a person of considerable bulk, with bow legs, the suggestion of a tricycle for the postman of Mirbridge would have seemed unpractical ; but 'the Duchess,'

like Buonaparte, had a habit, when she wanted anything done, of cancelling from her dictionary the word 'impossible.' If Nature had given her powers in proportion to her will, she would have followed the example of Xerxes and levelled the hill.

A discreet silence followed her last observation, till it was broken by the sharp and cheery sound of the post-horn. There was but one blast of it, for Saunders had no breath to spare for what he prosaically termed 'tootling;' but the last echo of it had hardly died away among the hills before the maid brought in the bag.

Not a word was said, though every eye was fixed on it as the Rector fumbled in his pocket for the key. It was said of him by some good-natured friend that nothing was ever in the right place with Percival Thorne except his heart, and it was certainly true that he had a habit of mislaying things. That he was always quite certain that he had not mislaid them, but that they ought to be where they were not, imposed on none of his household. Before he had done protesting, Lucy generally found the missing article; she had the instinct of the divining rod for such mysteries, combined with the swiftness of an Ariel.

On the present occasion the Rector had not lost his key, but only left it upstairs, where Lucy found it, on his dressing-table. In the meantime he passed a bad quarter of a minute, under the concentrated focus of Clara's majestic eyes. His indignation at the key having got under the lining of his pocket was expressed with less than his usual vigour of conviction; even his wife he perceived was a Sadducee. On any other morning she would have suggested something helpful; but, like the rest, she was impatient for the contents of this particular letter-bag. At last it was emptied on the breakfast-table.

'There it is!' cried Lucy, her quick eye lighting on the expected missive. She clapped her hands with excitement.

Clara smiled compassionately, almost contemptuously, as though she would have said, 'My dear child, why this enthusiasm? What *has* the matter to do with *you?*' Even Mrs. Thorne, generally so placidly imperturbable, murmured, 'Now we shall know.'

The Rector opened the letter, adjusted his glasses (brought out from his waistcoat pocket only on great occasions, like the sword of the Corporation of London), and exclaimed, after one glance at the contents:

'Good heavens! They are coming this morning!'

CHAPTER II.

THE CLOUD.

'THIS morning ?' echoed the Rector's wife in astonishment.

'What, before anyone is at the Hall to meet them ?' exclaimed Lucy.

'Perhaps papa would be so good as to read the letter aloud, that we may learn what has really happened,' observed Clara.

The observation was not complimentary to the Rector's intelligence, but it was made without disrespect. The Duchess had made up her mind that the parties in question would adopt a certain course of procedure, and it seemed, therefore, incredible to her that they should have pursued another.

'I cannot do that, Clara,' returned the Rector mildly, 'because the communication is marked "Private." It is not from her ladyship, my dear Amy,' he continued, 'so you need not be jealous; but from Sir Richard.'

This little attempt at pleasantry, though doubtless well meant, was very ill-received indeed. There is a time for joking, but also a time for abstaining from it—such, for instance, as one of universal disappointment, which was the present case. The Rector's joke fell as flat as if it had been laid on the table of the General Assembly at Holyrood.

'Do you mean to say there will be no gathering at the Court to-day at all ?' inquired Clara, with the air of one who is ready to hear the worst.

'Just so; that is the very thing they object to.'

'*Who* objects to it ?'

'Sir Richard—that is to say, he does so on behalf of his wife.'

The three ladies exchanged glances of great significance. It is recorded of an English traveller, much importuned upon his private affairs by an American citizen, that he agreed with him, upon condition that no more questions were asked, to state candidly how he came to lose his arm. He then said, 'It was bit off.' The effect upon his interlocutor was similar to that which the Rector's disclosure had upon his audience; it only gave their curiosity a still keener edge.

'Is Lady Trevor, then, in bad health ?' inquired Mrs. Thorne. There was sympathy in her tone, because it was impossible for one so kind to banish it from such a question; but sympathy was not its keynote.

'There is no actual illness, but Sir Richard hints at a constitutional delicacy, which renders all scenes of excitement prejudicial to her.'

'This is the first time we have heard of it,' observed Clara, in sarcastic disapproval.

The poor Rector shrugged his shoulders, as though to shift from them the responsibility of her ladyship's state of health.

'Are they all coming home together, papa?' inquired Lucy.

'Not all; at least, Sir Richard only mentions Hugh as accompanying them. Charles, I suppose, remains in town pursuing his legal studies.'

It suddenly struck the Rector that he was undergoing a cross-examination at the hands of these unlearned counsel about the contents of a communication that was private and confidential, and ought to have been privileged.

'I must really go at once to Farmer Austin,' he exclaimed, rising from his chair; 'he has been getting up his little speech on behalf of the tenantry for the last fortnight, and I must relieve his mind from its unnecessary strain. It will be a great disappointment, I know, to the rest of them—Lucy dear, my coat and hat—who had promised themselves the pleasure of hearing him break down.'

'But the poor people!' observed Mrs. Thorne compassionately.

'Oh, the festivities in the marquee are to be carried out according to the programme; only there is to be no deputation to the Court.'

'It is very strange,' murmured the Rector's wife; 'why did they not think of all this before?'

'Perhaps that was my fault, my dear. I took it for granted that they would expect something of the kind, and never wrote about it till my last letter, to which this is the reply; Sir Richard, having lived so long abroad, has doubtless forgotten our old English custom.'

'His going abroad at all seems to have been a great mistake,' sighed Mrs. Thorne.

'No doubt, no doubt,' assented the Rector. 'Lucy, my umbrella. You may count upon my presence at luncheon, my dears, when I shall no doubt have seen the new-comers, and be better able to satisfy your natural and legitimate curiosity.'

This parting speech, so full of conciliation, was received in frigid silence. To respect the confidence even of a man one has never seen, and of whom one has heard but little to his advantage, is, of course, only right and proper; but there are more sacred duties towards one's own flesh and blood—such, for example, as when they are athirst for information to gratify it. The three ladies, although in different degrees, all felt aggrieved.

'I suppose, at least, that it will not be considered an intrusion for the Rector's wife and daughters to call at the Hall

and offer their congratulations,' observed Mrs. Thorne doubtfully.

'A card left at the front door,' suggested Lucy demurely, 'might, possibly, not disturb the delicate balance of her ladyship's nerves.'

This sarcasm would have been acceptable enough, had not the circumstances been too serious for persiflage.

'After all, one must make allowance for her being a Frenchwoman,' observed the lady of the house, after a long pause.

'But *is* she a Frenchwoman, mamma,' inquired Lucy.

'It is supposed so. At all events, Sir Richard married her in France, almost immediately after he left Mirbridge, and neither of them have ever visited England since.'

'And why did Sir Richard—or Mr. Trevor as he then was—leave Mirbridge, mamma?'

Mrs. Thorne was sometimes afflicted with a slight cough; it was wont to trouble her when any of her belongings discussed family affairs before the servant, or when the Rector ventured to rally the Duchess; also on the rare occasions when she thought it necessary to administer a jobation to the gardener; it was of two kinds, the cough monitory and the premonitory, but both were the result of delicacy of feeling, and not of anything amiss with the bronchial tubes.

'I believe it was in consequence of some village scandal,' she answered drily; 'as it happened five-and-twenty years ago, however, it is scarcely worth while to talk about it—— Have you brought down the keys of the store cupboard, my dear?'

'Yes, mamma.' It was a question that hardly needed a reply; a soldier would as soon have thought of going into battle without his sword as Lucy of coming down in the morning without the means of distributing what was wanted below stairs for the day. She was her father's lieutenant, but her mother's purser. It was not difficult for her, therefore, to understand that the inquiry was only a gentle hint that her presence could be dispensed with. She rose at once, and left the room with a smile; not that she wished to go, but to give assurance of her willing service.

Hardly had the door closed behind her, when 'Why *did* Mr. Trevor leave Mirbridge?' inquired Clara.

Curiously enough, the importunity would scarcely have struck even a stranger as in bad taste, or out of place. Though there was only a year or two between the ages of the sisters, there was a whole generation in their respective characters; and this was evident in their appearance. In Lucy's hearing, any decent woman would have hesitated to allude to a circumstance not entirely *comme il faut;* she would have had no more hesitation in doing so before Clara, than if that young lady had been of

Parian marble. Mrs. Thorne answered her eldest daughter's question instantly :

'Mr. Trevor was under a cloud on account of that miserable story of Letty Beeton.'

'I conclude so. But what *was* the story?'

'Well, she was the mistress of the village school—a young woman of some intelligence and of rare beauty, to whom the late Lady Trevor showed a great but mistaken kindness. Nothing would satisfy her but that the young girl should live under her own roof. It was a most unfortunate infatuation.'

'Sir Richard wanted to marry her, did he not?'

'I don't know that; indeed, one knows nothing, of course, except from hearsay. Sir Marmaduke, his father, though he was a Dissenter, and built that dreadful chapel, was one of the proudest men in England; he would never have consented to a *mésalliance*.'

'But it was something worse than an intrigue, was it not?'

'I don't know what *can* be worse, my dear,' observed Mrs. Thorne gravely, almost reprovingly. 'However, it had the most terrible results.'

'Yes, indeed—twenty-five years of exile,' mused Clara.

'That was the young man's punishment. I am thinking, however, of poor Letty. It cost her her life: she and her child died within a few hours of one another.'

'Here in Mirbridge?'

'No, in London.'

'But why should he not have returned to the Court all these years?'

'Remorse, let us hope, had something to do with it.'

'Nevertheless, he seems to have married somebody else very soon afterwards,' observed Clara, shaking a crumb from her dress.

'That is true; but in any case it is easy to imagine that he would wish the memory of such an event to have worn out before he came back again. It is supposed Sir Marmaduke's death was hastened by it. His mother, too, though she died only last year, is said never to have smiled after the matter came to light.'

'A widespread catastrophe, indeed,' observed Clara. 'The dowager, however, went to live with her son and his present wife, did she not?'

'For the last few years, yes. It is supposed that her dying wish was the cause of their now coming home.'

'I suppose no one knows anything of the present family?'

'No one in Mirbridge. Your father has heard from Sir Richard from time to time. Considering that he is an absentee, he is not illiberal. I wish, indeed, he was rather less so in one

sense. I hope I am not uncharitable, but that keeping up of the chapel—considering what sort of doctrine is preached in it—is perfectly monstrous, and a great misfortune for everybody.'

'Old Sir Marmaduke was a Calvinist, I suppose?'

'Yes, but Sir Richard is not. "If anything," he writes, "I am an English Churchman." One does not like that "if anything," does one?'

'It is certainly significant. As to the keeping up of the chapel, however, since he is not in sympathy with the sect, there is something filial as well as liberal in it, unless, indeed, he is so well off that money is of no consequence to him.'

'This is not at all the case,' observed Mrs. Thorne.

'Indeed; yet he seems to own all Mirbridge.'

'Sir Richard's rent-roll, however, is not nearly so large as that of his father was, land is so depreciated; and he has nothing, I am told, but the land. That all descends, by entail, upon his elder son; so that there will be literally nothing left for the younger but what his father can save for him during his lifetime.'

'Had the present Lady Trevor, then, no money?'

'None that I ever heard of. Nobody, however, knows who she was, or anything about her, except that she is said to be very beautiful.'

'She must have had something to recommend her,' remarked Clara thoughtfully, 'or Sir Marmaduke, who, you say, was such a proud man, would no more have consented to the match than to that other.'

'A very just observation, my dear; but it is possible that "that other," as you call it, had something to do with it. Sir Marmaduke, who was a very religious man in his way, may have altered his views—or, at all events, relaxed them—in order to see his son married and settled. He did not, indeed, attend the wedding, for which, on the other hand, the state of his health was a sufficient cause—but he is understood to have advanced no objection to it, and to have made the young couple a handsome allowance.'

'The united ages of the "young couple,"' remarked Clara drily, 'must be now ninety, at least.'

'Yes, that, or nearly that, if Lady Trevor is of the same age as her husband. Their son, Hugh, must be twenty-three at least, and Charles just a year younger. It is exactly a generation ago since the present Sir Richard left Mirbridge. He will have a difficult part to play, I fear. Even if everything to his disadvantage were quite forgotten, it is not easy to pick up the threads of social life after so long an interval. Whether he succeeds or not will greatly depend upon what sort of wife he brings with him.'

'Then he will probably not succeed.'

'Nay; why should you say that Clara?' remonstrated her mother.

The Duchess shrugged her ample shoulders.

'Is it likely, mamma, that a Frenchwoman with nerves will conciliate the county?'

'In my opinion, her being French will be a distinct advantage to her: mistakes will be the more readily forgiven her; and people will not be able to say that she is "connected with trade," which, if she were an Englishwoman, they would be sure to do. She may be a Montmorenci for all they know, or will probably be able to discover. As for ourselves, it is our bounden duty to help her all we can, if only for the sake of the parish.'

'I suppose so,' admitted Clara. 'It is but fair, at all events, that she should have her chance.'

It was a very characteristic speech, and Mrs. Thorne was much too wise to gainsay it. The slender patronage, however, that was thus obviously to be afforded by her elder daughter to the Lady of the Manor troubled her not a little. In the store-room she took the opportunity to say a few words upon the same subject to Lucy.

'Your sister, I am afraid, is rather inclined to be prejudiced against Lady Trevor,' she said; 'and I think I noticed in what you said yourself, my dear, a similar feeling.'

'It was only because I was disappointed at her forbidding the reception at the Court,' explained Lucy, laughing. 'Of course it was all in fun; and I did not like the notion of my mother calling on *anybody* and not being welcomed.'

Mrs. Thorne patted her daughter's cheek caressingly.

'I was sure you meant no harm, my darling, at all events. What I want to impress upon you is that Lady Trevor, being a foreigner—or what is equivalent to it, knowing nothing of our English ways—will have a difficult task here in getting on with people; and that we must all do our best to help her.'

'I am afaid that I can be of very small service to her, dear mamma; but whatever I can do, I will do.'

'And if she is a little nervous, as Sir Richard calls it, and shrinks from us, whether from shyness or pride, you will not stand on your dignity—nor mine—but still do your best to smooth the way for her?'

'I will indeed, mamma; you may rely on me.'

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST WELCOME.

WHAT used to be a common sight enough upon an English road, but is now one of the rarest, is a travelling carriage 'with four posters.' It is so rare that it is almost necessary to explain that

the latter expression meant four post-horses with two postillions, not an old-fashioned bedstead. On Derby-days and wedding-days such sights are still to be seen; though where the postillions come from is a problem that still remains unsolved. Have they any other employment at other times, or do they hibernate as it were, and only appear in their brief summer of custom?

Sir Richard Trevor, at all events, had the good fortune to discover a pair of them—though of very advanced age for 'boys'—and was driving to Mirbridge, which had no railway station within ten miles, in the old style. It is an exhilarating method of progress enough; Dr. Johnson thought there were few things in this world equal to it, but from 'worth by poverty depressed,' and other causes, it must be confessed that he had had little experience of sitting behind four horses. It did not exhilarate either Sir Richard or her ladyship at all.

The Baronet, as we know, had only just reached middle life; or—since this term always varies with the age of those who use it—let us say he was still considerably on the right side of fifty. He looked however, much older, though, curiously enough, this was not owing to the usual signs of age. His hair was still plentiful, and though it had lost the wave which had crested it in youth—a much more becoming attribute than the short curl—it showed not one tinge of gray, His figure, as he now and then stood up to scan the once familiar landscape, was straight and slim as a pine; indeed, its slightness spoke of delicacy of health; his eyes, too, roved from object to object with a brightness that had it belonged to youth itself might have been thought excessive. On the other hand, his face, which was otherwise a very handsome one, was deeply lined; there were sunken lanes leading to the corners of his mouth, and dark caverns under his eyes. The ungloved fingers with which he steadied himself when he stood up were thin and shrunk. His face expressed anxiety, almost apprehension. When he smiled his face was very attractive. It was easy to believe that at one time it would have been difficult for a woman of sensibility, or even sense, to have resisted its fascination; but he very seldom smiled. His voice was naturally melodious, but it had acquired that tone of impatience and irritation which belongs to the invalid. Sir Richard had hinted in his letter to the Rector of his wife's nerves being unstrung, but the remark seemed to apply to himself, rather than to the lady who sat by his side.

Lady Trevor was far, indeed, from looking robust; her figure was graceful and her complexion delicate, but no doctor who knew his business would have pronounced her to be in ill health. She wore a veil, but it seemed rather to enhance than to conceal her marvellous beauty, which, though she was no longer young,

was still the beauty which belongs to the maid rather than to the matron; it was not of course the 'beauty of the Devil' (that most irresistible of female charms to fallen man), but yet it had some near relation to it; the intelligence and mobility of her features, the tenderness of her eyes, the grace of her every movement, were most remarkable. These things were, of course, mainly observable only when she spoke or moved; for the most part she remained silent, leaning back in the carriage with half-closed eyes as though wearied by long travel, yet somehow it seemed that nothing escaped either eye or ear. When any remark was made either by her husband or her son, who sat opposite to her, which remained unanswered, she would reply to it, even though it referred to some object on the way already passed by, in a manner that showed the keenness of her observation. Her voice was very sweet, and though her speech could hardly be called 'broken English,' it had just so much of foreign accent about it as gives piquancy without exciting ridicule.

The third occupant of the vehicle, a young man of two or three-and-twenty, afforded a strong contrast to his parents. He was handsome, but quite in a different way from either of them. He had curling brown hair, blue eyes, and a thoroughly English face; its expression was one of great good-nature, though by no means the mere good-nature of a fool. It betokened a character unsuspicious, eager, and impulsive, but with the saving clause of humour. None who possess this last attribute can be easily gulled, because it has a fine perception of roguery. In place of the impatient irritation displayed by his father, and the *insouciance* of his mother, this young gentleman evinced the keenest interest in everything.

'How far is it to Mirbridge from here, father? We are getting near home now, are we not?' were questions that he put continually. When they came to the forked road where the old sign-post indicates 'Mirbridge, four miles,' and the long ascent of the Bridge Hill begins, his excitement increased.

'What a glorious spectacle must be seen from the top yonder, since even here the view is so beautiful!' he exclaimed; 'there is nothing like the first sight of a place to impress one with its beauties.'

'Just so,' observed his father, as if in excuse for his own lack of enthusiasm; 'to me the whole landscape is as familiar as though I had left it yesterday. I seem to recognise every stick and stone.'

'That is the advantage of country over town. Things do not change in a place like this.'

'No, but *we* change,' observed Sir Richard bitterly. 'See, Nannie, through the opening of the wood yonder lies the Fairy

Bower—I have often spoken to you about it, you know,' he added, in a more indifferent tone. Under the carriage-rug which was spread over them, Lady Trevor had sought her husband's hand, and pressed it.

'In my day,' he continued, 'it was a place for whispering lovers made—a kind of ante-room to the village church. I dare say it has not lost its uses.'

'Rather a chilly place for a rendezvous, I should think,' observed her ladyship, with a glance at the spot in question, followed by a little shiver.

'This road winds like a corkscrew, and is full of short cuts,' remarked the young gentleman, who had been viewing it for some time with impatience; 'I will get out and stretch my legs a little. I am much mistaken if I am not before you at the top, notwithstanding your four horses;' and placing his hand on the side of the carriage he vaulted out of it, and began to climb the hill.

'Good heavens! how imprudent you are, Richard!' were Lady Trevor's first words when he was out of earshot. They were spoken in French, but yet in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper.

'It was a slip of the tongue,' he answered moodily, in the same language; 'and after all, there is no harm done.'

'But there might have been, and the most fatal harm. If you cannot set a watch on yourself, even on the first day of your return, with all my warnings fresh in your memory, what hope is there for you as day after day, month after month, year after year——'

'There will be no need for caution so long as that,' interrupted Sir Richard, 'so far as I am concerned.'

'Oh, Richard!' she murmured, with gentle pathos.

'Such is my firm conviction, Nannie, as it was Du Plat's. One can tell the truth about *that*, at all events.' Then, as he saw her press her gloved hands to her face and lower her shapely head in dumb distress, his voice suddenly grew tender. 'It is very good of you, my dear, to feel sorry at my impending departure from this world; some, however, would never have forgiven a man——'

In his emotion he had spoken in his native tongue. She broke in with a terrified 'Hush, hush!' then, after a struggle with her tears, she said: 'Pray—pray do not speak of that. Think of it as forgotten; that is by me, but never, never by others.'

'Tush! others have other things to think about.'

'Not here. That is your error. Where few events happen, they loom largely in men's eyes and are remembered. Every step you take here will be on dangerous ground. Your dear

mother knew it, even when she counselled our return for Hugh's sake.'

'I suppose she was right,' he answered thoughtfully; 'but I am sorry he is to be with us.'

'Why? No danger can arise from that source; for, thank heaven, he knows nothing, and can, therefore, tell nothing.'

'I was thinking of quite other dangers; he will have so much idle time on his hands here. When I look at him I seem to see myself again as I was twenty years ago.'

'He will have a mother to watch over him,' observed Lady Trevor.

'So had I,' was the bitter rejoinder.

'But not such a one as he will have. Your mother was an angel, Richard; ignorant herself of evil, she knew nothing of its existence in others. She lived as though she were in heaven already, and dreamt that all around her were like herself.'

'Poor soul, she had a sad awakening!' sighed Sir Richard.

'That, at all events, will not be my case. If I fail to guard Hugh from himself, it will not be through want of knowledge.'

Sir Richard shook his head.

'You think too much of the lad, Nannie. I trust you may never find, as *my* mother did, that her idol had feet of clay.'

'She found it so with both her idols, Richard.'

There was a long pause. Sir Richard's eyes roved around him unceasingly on hill and stream, and those of his wife followed their every glance. She well knew with what his thoughts were busy. Presently she repeated, very softly, those tender lines of reminiscence with which the Laureate has made us all familiar:

> 'All along the valley, where thy waters flow,
> I walked with one I loved two-and-twenty years ago;
> All along the valley, while I walked to-day,
> The two-and-twenty years were mist that rolls away.'

'True,' he murmured, 'all things here are as though it were yesterday; the difference is in myself. It is another man who is beholding them. Oh to have one's youth again, even for an hour!'

'An idle wish, Richard; as vain as that which would evoke the dead from their graves. You are not the only one who would recall the past,' she replied.

'But you, at least, Nannie, have a future. For me, life is not only a pathway which it is impossible to retrace, but leads after a few more steps to the grave.'

'Heaven grant that your forebodings may not be realized, Richard!' answered Lady Trevor, in a voice she strove in vain to free from tears. 'Think what I have to suffer, and yet not to seem to suffer, and for my sake forbear to dwell upon them.'

More than once as the carriage and four toiled up the long, steep hill it had been met by some country wayfarer on foot, who had tugged his forelock in homage to the rank and wealth which the equipage seemed to indicate. Each, no doubt, had pictured its two inmates not only in the lap of luxury, but in the seventh heaven of happiness, without a care in the world that could be called such, and gone on his way with a sigh of envy. Whether these passers-by knew who this pair were or not, they gave no sign of recognition; but presently Sir Richard met with his first welcome.

The panting horses were resting on a little plateau of road, after an ascent more sharp and steep than usual, just as a light cart coming downhill at a great pace arrived at the same place. The shaggy, but sure-footed, pony that drew it was violently pulled up by its driver so close to the more aristocratic vehicle that a comparison—unfavourable to the cart—could hardly fail to be drawn between them. The fact of its being upon wheels was indeed the only claim to its title of vehicle at all. It seemed to be made up of half a dozen boards carelessly nailed together, with a loose board placed from side to side by way of seat; the shafts both bore signs of fracture, and were mended by rope, and the reins themselves were of the same material. The driver was a surly fellow, of unwholesome appearance, though there still hung about him the remains of good looks; he was in reality scarcely fifty, but he looked fully ten years older, the result of a hard and fast life, which would have exhausted any ordinary constitution. He had a reckless air, which his head-gear—a billycock-hat, worn very much on one side, and ornamented with a black clay pipe stuck in its band—was not calculated to mitigate. He wore a fustian suit, terminated by a pair of patched boots, with about the same proportion of leather to the nails in it as there is of wood to iron in an ironclad.

'Glad to see you back, Sir Richard,' he said gruffly enough, and even with a certain air of intentional disrespect; then added, in a tone which was designed to be more courteous, 'and her ladyship too.'

'Thank you, Jack,' replied the Baronet cheerfully. 'By your face being set the other way, I am afraid we are not to see you in the tent presently.'

'Not I! Your wittles and drink would suit me down to the ground, Sir Richard, but not your company. There will be too many there as has got a grudge against me, either for fur or feathers, for me to join them.'

'I should have thought you had now no need to run such risks,' observed Sir Richard severely.

'Well, perhaps not; but what's bred in the bone, you know, will come out in the meat. I believe if I had as big a preserve

as you have, Sir Richard, I should not be able to keep within my own boundaries. That was your son, I suppose, as I just met on the hill; a handsome, well-set-up young gentleman enough, though I don't see no likeness in him to his father, nor yet to his mother,' added the speaker, with a very bold and searching glance at her ladyship.

'For heaven's sake let us drive on,' said Lady Trevor in the French tongue; 'another minute of this and I shall lose my senses.'

Mr. John Beeton, basketmaker and poacher, had many gifts, but the knowledge of foreign languages was denied him; it was, indeed, the very first time in his life that he had ever heard any tongue spoken save his own, and it filled him with pleased amazement.

'Lord a mercy, is that how she talks?' he exclaimed admiringly. 'Now what, if I may make so bold, may she be saying?'

'She has noticed your pipe in your cap, and wonders whether it is for you that I have brought a certain parcel of tobacco from London that I spoke to her about; and, as it happens, it *is* for you; and if you'll look in at the Court to-morrow you shall have it. Go on, boys.'

The carriage started instantly, leaving the occupant of the cart to stare after it with a frowning brow.

'I'm hanged if I believe she said one word about tobacco,' he remarked, muttering. 'She's a proud devil as ever I set eyes on, and she didn't like my being so free with Sir Richard, that was it; but I did it o' purpose. I was not going to let him suppose that that hundred pounds to the old man—he was a fool to take less than a thousand—and his beggarly pound a week to me has made up for the disgrace he has brought upon my family. Why, if he made it a weekly fiver the obligation would still be on his side. However, gee up, 'oss—I'll go to-morrow and get the 'bacca.'

There was silence between the occupants of the carriage for several minutes. Lady Trevor lay back with closed eyes, and pale to the very lips, like one in a swoon.

'It must have been a terrible trial to you,' said her husband pityingly; 'but, after all, it's just as well to have met him, and got it over.'

The observation, if it had been made to rouse her, had fulfilled its purpose.

'Got it over,' she echoed bitterly; 'and you have asked him to come to the Court to-morrow!'

'I did it designedly,' was the quiet reply. 'It would never do to let Jack Beeton imagine that I shrank from meeting him. Unless you wish it, he need not, of course, see *you*—you will act your part as it suits you. If it is more difficult than mine,

you have, on the other hand, more tact and better wits to play it; as for me, I must grasp my nettles.'

'Pardon me, Richard; you are quite right. If you have shown imprudence to-day, I have shown cowardice—which is worse: it shall not happen again. I am thankful at least for one thing, that dear Hugh was not with us.'

'True; he would have resented Jack's manner without doubt. Knocked his hat off, pipe and all, most likely; and then there would have been a deuce of a row.'

A smile flitted across the Baronet's face as he spoke, which he put up his hand to conceal. There was an element of coarse humour about him that was in strong contrast to his other characteristics.

'It is also a matter of congratulation that I wrote to the parson to decline the deputation; you would not now have had the nerve for such a thing.'

'On the contrary, I should have been quite prepared for it. After what has happened, all other ordeals sink into insignificance: it was the meeting which I dreaded most of all; and since, for to day at least, I am safe from a repetition of it, I feel as if I had nothing to fear.'

She threw back her veil with a certain air of defiance, though it showed a face deadly pale, and glanced boldly around her. Her expression might now have been taken—though, indeed, it was far from being so—by those who knew who and what she was, to be one of pride; for, from the top of the hill which they had now reached, so far as the eye could see—copse, field and farm, with the stately towers of Mirbridge Court dominating the whole scene—all belonged to her husband, and would revert by an immutable law to her son.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

'WHAT do you say to a walk this morning, Lucy?' inquired Clara Thorne, when her sister re-appeared in the breakfast-room, work-box in hand—a sign that her housekeeping duties had been accomplished.

'I should like it of all things.'

'I am afraid, however, since you are only a convalescent, that the Bridge Hill will be beyond your powers.'

'But why should it be to the Bridge Hill? Oh, I see!'—for the lovely complexion of the Duchess had suddenly become roseate, as though a strawberry had been mingled with its cream—'you wish to have the first look at the new arrivals.'

'I confess that I am very anxious to see what they are like.'

was the frank reply. To have concealed her intention from her sister would have been impossible, and to do her justice it never entered into her mind to attempt it. Among other historical parallels, Clara was sometimes likened by her father to the great Napoleon ; but this was only in regard to his wide and imperial views. She had none of his petty ways and small deceits. 'I had rather trust my own impressions than dear papa's description of them. If Lady Trevor is as pretty as she is said to be, we know what his judgment on *her*, for example, will be beforehand. Men are all alike in that way. Women are not so easily led away by good looks.'

'The good looks of their own sex, you mean,' said Lucy, laughing.

'Indeed, I make no such exception. What does it matter to *us*, after the first few minutes, whether a man is plain or good-looking ? I have read somewhere of a very ugly, but very agreeable fellow, who used to boast that as regarded pleasing us he was only a quarter of an hour behind the handsomest man in England ; and it was a very just remark.'

'That quarter of an hour may, however, be fatal if, as I too have read somewhere,' observed Lucy demurely, 'there is such a thing as love at first sight.'

'There is such a thing, no doubt, my dear,' answered Clara, laughing. 'It is called "calf-love," because I notice men generally entertain it for women old enough to be their mothers.'

It was plain, from the speaker's age, that she herself could have done no execution in that way; yet her tone had all the confidence which comes from personal experience. It had, however, none of that patronage which is commonly bestowed upon a younger sister, but, on the contrary, was full of good-nature and high spirits—a circumstance that emboldened Lucy to make more free with her grace than usual.

'I must confess, my dear Clara,' she said slily, 'that supposing, of course, no harm should have come of it, I should dearly like to see you head over ears in love with a Detrimental.'

'Then there is one pleasure in life, my dear, which you may make up your mind you will never experience, for, even if I could afford it, which is quite out of the question——'

'Perhaps as a well-jointured widow,' put in Lucy.

'Be so good as to put on your things, miss.'

She did not speak crossly, but just a little curtly—much as a noble St. Bernard, who has borne patiently the gambols and yappings of an Italian greyhound, at last utters his deep-throated veto. With a movement of her pretty lips (for which the French only have found a name) significant of exaggerated alarm, but like the 'Oh dear, I am so frightened!' of the school-

boy, with something of reality about it, too, Lucy hastened away to dress.

Their way lay through the garden, at the end of which was a wicket-gate that opened on a hill-path, by which the ascent was greatly lessened. The sun was at this time high in the heavens, and made the face of nature still more glorious; the moss-covered boulders gleamed with golden dew; the beck sparkled as it sang on its way to join the Mir; and the spring flowers filled the air with an incense which no white-robed choristers 'swinging their censers and making a smell' can rival. It was a day for 'the Canopists'—that large and growing sect who prefer the canopy of heaven to a cathedral roof for their devotional exercises.

'I do think our garden is the prettiest in the world!' exclaimed Lucy ecstatically. 'There is so much of nature in it and so little of art that it might be the Garden of Eden.'

'There is one resemblance, at all events,' observed Clara; 'we are liable to be turned out of it at any moment, though, indeed, for no fault of our own.'

'Oh, Clara, how can you think of such things!—if, as I suppose, you refer to what would take place if anything should happen to dear papa!'

'Do you imagine he does not think of it himself?'

'No, indeed. I know that he does; and it is very sad that he should make himself so miserable on our account. For my part, I shut such dreadful things out of my mind, not only as regards dear papa, but even the garden. Those lines about it in "In Memoriam" always make me cry:

> '"Unwatched the garden bough shall sway,
> The tender blossom flutter down,
> Unwatched this beech shall gather brown,
> That maple burn itself away!
>
> '"Till from the garden and the wild
> A fresh association flow,
> And year by year the landscape grow
> Familiar to the stranger's child."

I confess I don't like that "stranger's child," though after all it is how the poor Spensers think of us.'

'You need not call them poor,' returned Clara drily. 'Mr. Spenser left Mirbridge because he was given a better living, and I only wish papa could do the same.'

'What! You would leave Mirbridge and our garden for the sake of a few extra pounds a year?'

'I did not say *that*. I have my little sentimental weaknesses like other people; but my views would be materially influenced by a few extra hundred pounds per annum. My requirements

are modest. I am not like Sir Robert Walpole's female Aristides, who would not take gold, but only diamonds, but I have my price.'

'Really, Clara, I sometimes think you ought to be a man instead of a woman.'

'A reflection I have often made myself, my dear,' was the quiet reply; 'as it is, I must fight my battle—and yours, my pretty one,' here she touched her sister's cheek in loving patronage—'as well as a poor woman may.'

'I hope there will be as little need for your fighting for me as against me, Clara,' returned Lucy, to whom this sort of talk gave a sense of discomfort if not of displeasure.

'Against you? Heaven forbid, my little one;' a smile which implied not only incredulity, but the absurdity of so unequal a contest, accompanied her words. 'Not that you have not weapons of your own, my dear,' she added apologetically, for the colour had come into Lucy's cheek, 'and capable, too, of great execution, I do not doubt; I only mean that I have courage enough for the two of us.'

It was true enough; no Amazon—though Clara Thorne was very unlike an Amazon—was ever more courageous. There was excitement, if not the light of battle, in her eye as she spoke; she looked for the moment less like Juno than Minerva.

Presently, as they paused for breath at a corner of the hill, where a seat was placed for common use, 'I wonder,' observed Clara thoughtfully, 'what Hugh will be like?'

'Hugh? Do you mean Mr. Hugh Trevor?'

'Of course I do. As our much too-funny young doctor would say, "Who else could I mean?"'

'That reminds me,' cried Lucy in accents of dismay, 'that Mr. Wood was to call to see me this morning with his stethoscope.'

'I'm very glad you've missed him,' was the unsympathizing reply. 'A man that would make a pun, says Dr. Johnson, would pick a pocket, and we know that this man does both. Moreover, I have a suspicion that he is not so solicitous about any affection of your lungs, my dear, as of your heart.'

'My dear Clara, how can you be so ridiculous! I mean'—for Clara had drawn herself up, which was a storm-signal—'how can you possibly impute such a motive to Dr. Wood? he never calls at the Rectory except at papa's request, and he is coming to-day to make what he calls a diagnosis.'

'Well, I have told you my diagnosis of *him*. It's my belief that the stethoscope has made more fortunes for the doctors—by marriage—than any other scientific discovery.'

'Mr. Wood would not make his fortune by marrying *me*,' said Lucy, laughing.

'His views, like mine, may be modest,' observed Clara, with a humour that sat strangely on her stately face. It was evident that whatever suspicion she might attach to Mr. Wood's intentions, she had not much apprehension of their success.

Presently they reached the summit of the hill, where their path joined the highway. Lucy gazed around in all directions upon the beauties of a panorama that seemed ever new to her, and indeed she had not looked at them since they were clothed with the gorgeous robes of autumn. Clara kept her eyes fixed upon the west, where the road zigzagged down the steep for a mile or more into a fertile valley.

'This glorious spot,' said Lucy, 'always reminds me of some hill in an allegory. On one side of it there seems to be the world at large, on the other only our own little domain of Mirbridge.'

'Unhappily it is not our domain,' observed the other excitedly, 'but Sir Richard's. Come—there they are,' she cried agitatedly; 'we have arrived in the very nick of time.'

Lucy's eyes followed the direction of her sister's hand, which held an opera-glass, and perceived some insignificant object crawling up to the ascent at a great distance.

'I see nothing save what looks like a fly on a window-pane.'

'It is not, however (as your medical adviser would remark), a fly, but a travelling carriage with four horses; a very charming addition, to my mind, to any landscape.'

'I like them in the pictorial advertisements of the inns in *Bradshaw*, where carriages and four are always dashing up to the doors,' rejoined Lucy, laughing; 'but I don't know that I have ever seen one in a real landscape before; and indeed,' she added plaintively, 'I have not yet seen this one.'

'You shall have the glass directly, as soon as I've made a *reconnaissance* of her ladyship.'

'Sarvent, ladies,' exclaimed a gruff, sharp voice, which startled both the sisters not a little.

It was that of Mr. Jack Beeton, in his light cart, which, driven on the turf that formed a broad margin on both sides of the road, had come up without attracting their attention.

'Glad to see you out again, Miss Lucy.'

'Thank you, Mr. Beeton; I am quite well now.'

'And as to Miss Clara I needn't ask. Come to have a look at the new-comers, eh?' he added slily, his sharp eye detecting the object on which her gaze had been fixed. 'Would you mind my having a squint through them glasses, miss? Well, well, it don't matter'—for Clara's look and manner were eloquent of dissent—'I shall be face to face wi' 'em in five minutes;' and, with a flourish of his whip, he started at a gallop down the hill.

'That is the most bearish creature in all Mirbridge!'

ejaculated Clara. 'The idea of that man of all men being the first to meet them!'

'He is not a specimen that papa would have selected out of his whole flock, no doubt; a black sheep, in fact, I am afraid we must call him; still, I confess I have rather a sneaking liking for poor Jack.'

'May I ask why?' inquired Clara, with so little of interest in her tone, however, that it seemed probable she only did so to delay the surrender of her opera-glass, through which she was still gazing with eager intentness.

'Well, in the first place he sings so well.'

'He is not in the choir.'

'Certainly not,' laughed Lucy; 'I've only heard him in the open air.

'"For here's good luck to poaching,
Which I do think is fair;
Good luck to every gentleman
Who wants to buy a hare;

'"Bad luck to every gamekeeper
Who will not sell his deer,
For 'tis my delight on a shiny night
In the season of the year."'

The girl sang very sweetly, and if not with so much vigour as the robust vocalist she was imitating, as clearly as the lark. She had finished, when a voice from the hillside near them repeated, in harmonious accents, the refrain of the song:

'For 'tis my delight on a shiny night
In the season of the year.'

It was the young gentleman from the travelling carriage, who had overstepped his mark, and climbed higher than he had had need to do. Lucy coloured to her ear-tips, and wished she had a veil to drop. She could hardly understand where this human echo had come from, but Clara took in the whole situation at a glance.

'A thousand pardons,' exclaimed the stranger, removing his wideawake, and in apologetic tones, 'but I could not resist playing the part of chorus to my favourite ballad. You need not be ashamed of it, young lady,' he added, addressing himself to the embarrassed Lucy, 'for the Lord Chief Justice himself sang it to the Bar mess only last circuit.'

'Still,' observed Clara, with a smile that mitigated the stiffness of her tone, 'my sister feels that it is hardly a ditty for the daughter of the Rector of the parish to be caught singing on the high-road in the hearing of a stranger.'

'A stranger!' exclaimed the young fellow quickly, 'but that I can hardly be called—or need not be called again—if, as I under-

stand, I am so fortunate as to be addressing Mr. Thorne's daughters. My name is Trevor. I left my father and mother in the carriage yonder, and ran on on foot.

Clara looked the personification of majestic surprise at this superfluous introduction; Lucy, on the other hand, felt more embarrassed than ever—that it should have been the Squire's son who had caught her singing 'The Poacher' seemed to her only to add to the seriousness of the catastrophe. As if he understood something of this—for it seemed hardly possible that, other things being equal, he should have thus far neglected the Duchess—the young gentleman applied himself to cover Lucy's confusion.

'There is nothing like our English ballad,' he said, 'except a Scotch one, to give one an idea of country life. In London, especially at this sime of the year, when we all pine for the woods and fields, there are no songs so popular in the concert-room; for my part, I assure you, you could not have given me—however unintentionally—a more agreeable welcome home.'

'That reminds me that we must be going home ourselves, Lucy,' remarked Clara. The carriage, she calculated, must very soon make its appearance, and she had her reasons for not being found by Sir Richard and his wife in possession, as it were of their son and heir. The sisters slightly inclined their heads in sign of leave-taking.

'But is not your way my way, ladies?' pleaded the young fellow. 'Please to remember I don't know the road home as you do.'

'We are going by a short cut,' observed Clara, moving, as she spoke, towards the footpath.

'Then by all means let me take a short cut too.'

'We are not in a position to prevent you,' answered Clara, smiling, 'since it is not a private road.'

'If ever I have a "right of way" case, I shall think of this,' murmured the young gentleman; 'it will give me the eloquence of a Hampden.'

'Suppose, however, that your services should be engaged not by the trespassers, but by the landowner?'

'Then I should throw up the case: I am all for trespassers and poachers.'

He laid a stress upon the last word, and with a sly smile threw it, as it were—as one throws a soft ball at a child—at the silent Lucy. A frown flitted across Clara's majestic brow: if a ball was to be thrown, it was to her, she thought, that it ought to have come, and not to her sister.

'There is your carriage, Mr. Trevor,' she observed gravely; 'will not your mother be anxious at not finding you on the road? we have heard that she is rather nervous.'

'She will not be nervous about *me*,' he answered with a laugh,

that was not, however, without a tinge of bitterness. 'I have been accustomed to find my way about—and alone—for a good many years.'

Neither the observation nor the tone in which it was uttered escaped Clara's notice, but she made no reply; her attention was fixed upon the travelling carriage which had now come fully into view, though they themselves (being on a winding path on the hillside) were unperceived by its inmates. Her eyes instinctively turned to Lady Trevor. Her ladyship's veil was thrown back, and she was gazing eagerly in the direction of her new home, which Sir Richard seemed to be pointing out to her, as they rapidly descended towards the village.

'How charmingly young your mother looks, Mr. Trevor!' observed Clara, as they pursued their way.

'Yes; she is indeed a miracle.'

'Who would ever suppose that you could be her son? You are very unlike one another.'

'True; it is my brother, and not I, who inherits, among other things, her good looks,' he answered, laughing.

'Clara was thinking of Lady Trevor's complexion,' put in Lucy quickly; 'she is a brunette, whereas you——' here she hesitated and blushed.

'I am a blonde, am I? Well, I have been called all sorts of things, but I have never before been called a blonde;' and again he laughed, this time with great enjoyment.

'It is part of your profession as a barrister to put words into other people's mouths for them,' observed Clara drily. 'Have you had much practice?'

'Practice? What a cruel question! Is not your sister cruel to me?' he inquired of Lucy.

Mr. Trevor had shown her a marked attention, which her sister had as plainly resented, as though it were her own proper due; and Lucy had thought this hard. There fell upon her a great temptation. She had it on the tip of her tongue to reply, 'Clara is only cruel to be kind,' but she restrained herself.

'My sister,' she said, 'has a right to cross-examine a witness who has shown himself contumacious.'

'Very good; only mind, I am not going to criminate myself.'

'You have done it already, sir,' cried Clara, with a judicial air.

'How so?'

'Well, you are here at this moment under false pretences. You would have had us believe you couldn't find your way to your own house, though it lies yonder as plainly to be seen as the church tower: and you are an Englishman, when we expected to find you were half a Frenchman.'

'You were at least expecting me, then?' smiled the young fellow, with a glance at Lucy.

'Not at all, sir,' protested Clara, 'only curious about you—like our neighbours. Indeed, it seems more strange to those of them who had known your father in other days, than to us, that they should be in such ignorance concerning you all.'

'That is natural enough,' admitted the young fellow; 'there is no reason, that I know of, why their curiosity should not be gratified. As for me—the blonde—you will judge for yourselves. My father, though there is nothing serious the matter with him, I trust, is in ill-health, and has returned to Mirbridge in hopes that his native air may do something for him. My mother, who is not at all nervous, by-the-bye—or at all events you have been the first to tell me of it—is, as you have been rightly informed, a Frenchwoman. Her maiden name was Nanette Langlet. *Voilà tout.*'

'But you have a brother, have you not?'

'True; for the moment I was thinking only of the three of us who have arrived. Oh yes, I have, without doubt, a brother; he will join us, however, in a day or two. It will be better—and, indeed, I know he would prefer it—to let him speak for himself.'

CHAPTER V.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

THERE were several things in Mr. Trevor's very concise epitome of his family affairs which Clara Thorne would have liked to have had explained to her. The laughing air with which he had expressed himself took away from his words much of their cynicism, but there still remained a flavour of bitterness. She somehow gathered from them that he was not a favourite with his mother, and that his brother was not a favourite with him. Considering, indeed, the brevity of the information accorded to her, it was full of significance, and promised to be very useful as a map of the country; but she could not conceal from herself that it had cost her something—that the young man had rather resented being subjected to her cross-examination. This he showed, however, not in his manner, which remained unaltered, but in the persistence with which he addressed his conversation to to Lucy. There was plenty of it, for though every step of their way was down hill, their progress was slow. Perhaps, on the part of two out of three, designedly so, though it seemed natural enough that at the many coigns of vantage on the hill-path the new-comer should linger over the scene, and have its beauties pointed out to him.

'It is all so different,' he said, 'from our home landscape at Minard, where we have no trees but poplars, and all the roads are straight.'

'But perhaps you have the sea,' observed Lucy.

'We are not far from it, and that, as you suggest, is a source of consolation. When one hears it, even when it is in a passion, one says to one's self, "There speaks the silver streak, on the other side of which is dear England."'

'You are patriotic, then,' said Clara, smiling.

'If patriotism means preference for one's own country, I certainly am; so are all Englishmen who live abroad, because they are in a position to make a comparison.'

'Yet how all our people rave about the Continent!' remarked Clara.

'You may well say "rave." They see it in their holidays, and when it is itself *en fête* for their reception. No Englishman lives there, unless for his pocket's sake (though he saves but little by it), or his health (which would generally be quite as good at home), or because he has reasons best known to himself for being an exile.'

There was an uncomfortable silence, which the young man himself put an end to by a burst of laughter.

'Now you are thinking, after that tirade of mine, to which of those three causes our own exile from our native land is due. Well, upon my word, I fear it's the last; at least I never could discover what my father—though no doubt, he had some reason both good and wise—could see in Minard that he should prefer it to his own home—and such a home!' and he waved his hand over the landscape admiringly in a very Continental manner.

'I am so glad you like what you have seen of Mirbridge,' observed Clara.

'Like it! Of course I like it. The place and its inhabitants'—here he took off his hat—'are alike charming. Only I wish your sister had not laughed at me when I threw my arms about. I shall get out of it in time,' he added apologetically; 'but there is so much grimace and gesture in the Pas de Calais, and man is a creature of imitation.'

'I was only smiling at your enthusiasm, Mr. Trevor,' said Lucy; 'not in ridicule of it, I do assure you, for, indeed, my sister and I both share it.'

He looked at her as though he would have liked to share it with her alone, but answered nothing.

'We have heard, however, that both you and your brother have been long—or at least often—in England,' remarked Clara.

'My brother has only crossed the Channel occasionally; but it is quite true that I have been long enough in London to have worn off, had I been a more sensible fellow, my French *gaucheries*.'

'I did not know there was such a thing as French *gaucherie*,'

remarked Clara, smiling. 'We are accustomed to think it entirely a native product.'

'Indeed! I hope you may find it so,' he answered grimly; 'in the meantime, I am sorry to be the first to have destroyed the illusion.'

'Mr. Trevor is fishing for a compliment, Lucy; do you happen to have one about you?' inquired Clara.

The young man laughed aloud; his grimness had disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

'She is looking for one,' he cried ecstatically.

'Then she can't find it,' said Lucy gravely; 'you see, I was not brought up in France.'

'Now you have made her angry,' exclaimed the young man, glancing indignantly at Clara. 'It was not my fault this time, was it?' he added, turning pleadingly to Lucy. 'As for French compliments, they are often like French bonbons, with something inside of them quite different from what they look like; but doubtless you speak French yourself.'

'The French of Stratford-at-Bowe, I am afraid,' said Lucy, smiling.

'That is her modesty, I am sure,' observed the young fellow. 'Is it not so?'

He appeared to the elder sister, as though they were discussing a favourite child.

'If you are sure, you need not have asked me,' was the chilling reply; 'but as a matter of fact I believe Lucy and I speak French, considering we are stay-at-homes, passably well.'

'I am glad of that for my mother's sake; you are now sure to be friends.'

'Does not Lady Trevor then speak English with facility?' Her tone was now full of interest, and without the least trace of that annoyance which, indeed, only a passing irritation had wrung from her.

'She would hardly like me to say that; but she prefers, where it is possible, to use her native tongue. There always seems to me a certain artificial ring in her English—though it is perfectly good—which is absent, of course, in the case of my father. It is certainly a difficult language for outsiders. When I say, "I put out my hand," for example, that is an indication of friendliness; but if I say, "I put out my shoulder," it signifies a surgical operation. She is always afraid of making some absurd mistake.'

'We will correct your errors in English if you will do the same kind office for us in French,' said Clara. 'It was only yesterday that we had a family disagreement as to the exact difference between *filet* and a steak.'

'A filly,' observed the young gentleman, with the air of an

encyclopedist, 'is the animal that runs, and the stake is what she runs for.'

Lucy clapped her hands, as people do in the theatre. The young fellow coloured to the ear-tips with conscious pleasure.

'But that is really excellent,' observed Clara admiringly.

The young gentleman bowed his acknowledgments; he was grateful to her, of course, but not in the same degree. Her praise was welcome as that of editor to author, but Lucy's involuntary applause had been like the sale of the whole edition.

'This is the moment to wish us good-bye, Mr. Trevor, according to the French receipt for leave-taking,' continued Clara.' 'You will never say anything better than that.'

'Let me try,' pleaded the young fellow; 'give me another chance. Why should this limit be put to my intellectual powers?'

He turned, as usual, to Lucy for sympathy with the oppressed.

'It will please papa immensely,' she murmured.

'My going?' he inquired in alarm.

'No; the epigram.'

'Then I will devote myself to making epigrams.'

'I don't think you will find the atmosphere of Mirbridge very favourable to their manufacture,' observed Clara gravely. 'Papa has a small retail establishment of that nature, but the rest of us are very dull.'

'I don't think we are duller here than elsewhere,' said Lucy indignantly.

She loved Mirbridge and its people, and resented their being 'run down,' even by the Duchess.

'I can't imagine you being dull anywhere,' observed the young man, with an air of simplicity.

'You know that I did not mean that, Mr. Trevor,' said Lucy reprovingly. 'I was speaking generally.'

'Mr. Trevor does not certainly experience your difficulty in finding compliments, Lucy,' remarked Clara drily. 'I wonder whether they are like the French bonbons he spoke of?'

'No; they are like the British lollipop or suckabob,' asserted the young man boldly, 'without tinsel or glitter, but honest and genuine, and——'

'And cheap,' put in Lucy slily.

'I wish I had gone when I was told to go,' murmured the young fellow plaintively.

They had now reached the gate of the Rectory garden, where the footpath ran on into the high-road. It was obviously the place for parting.

'I really am afraid your people will be annoyed at your absence, Mr. Trevor,' observed Clara earnestly. 'That welcome, remember'—for as she spoke the bells from the church-tower

rang out a merry peal—'is intended for you as well as for them.'

'I feel as if I had received my welcome already,' replied the young fellow gratefully; 'but I suppose I must be off. It is something, however, to depart under a good augury; and it is not, thank heaven, good-bye, but only *au revoir*.'

He was gone in a moment: the two girls watched him as he flew down the hill.

'He is a strange mixture of French and English,' observed Clara.

'That is what renders him a little unintelligible, I suppose,' mused Lucy.

It was upon Clara's lips to say, 'He seemed to make himself quite understood, as far as you were concerned at least,' but she restrained herself.

It was ridiculous to feel jealous of Lucy even for a moment. Like a general held in check by a small force, but conscious of great reserves, she had no doubt of how the battle would go eventually.

'Now, what did he mean, for example,' continued Lucy, 'by saying that he was departing under a good augury?'

'He meant *that*,' said Clara, holding up her finger, as the music of the wedding-peal rang out among the hills; 'but to have said so would have been a little too forward, even for Hugh Trevor.'

'Do you call him "forward"?'

'Not if you object to it; but he was certainly free in his manners.'

'Is not that a little severe? The word seems to suggest impertinence of some kind, and he was surely not impertinent.'

'Let us say he was frank, then.'

'And, also, good fun,' observed Lucy, smiling like one who is tickled by a reminiscence.

'I never thought of him as an object of amusement,' returned Clara reprovingly. 'You do not seem to consider, my dear, how our lives may be affected by the arrival of these Trevors, and what sort of people they may turn out to be. Fortunately, this young gentleman has, in his impulsive way, given us a hint of what we may expect as regards one, at least, of his parents. I gather that her ladyship rules the roast, and that she does not spoil her eldest born.'

'What was still more evident, and I confess I did not like it,' observed Lucy, 'was that there seemed to be no love lost between Mr. Hugh and his brother. I fear that must often happen when the one is the heir of all things, and the other of only a very little.'

'Nevertheless, when a title has to be kept up, or an old family

maintained in its old style, such an arrangement is necessary, and recommends itself to common sense,' said the Duchess didactically.

'But that does not make it recommend itself to the younger son,' rejoined Lucy, laughing. 'At all events, I shall judge for myself about Mr. Charles, and am very curious to see him.'

'He does not interest me in the least,' answered Clara coldly; 'though I do not say that his presence will not be a convenience. He will make up our game of lawn tennis, for example; three is always an awkward number.'

'That is true,' said Lucy; 'and poor Dr. Wood is never to be depended upon.'

'I am glad to hear you say so,' returned Clara austerely. 'Here is mamma come to meet us.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE TREVORS: PAST AND PRESENT.

TREVOR COURT was a happy architectural example of the fusion of new bricks and mortar with old ones. Originally a very ancient structure, it had been added to from time to time, and fifty years ago it had been 'restored.' It had at one time been surrounded by a moat, but this had been long drained off to give place to lawn and garden. The drawbridge existed no longer, but in its place was a moss-grown causeway, built on arches fully as picturesque. The mansion possessed few historical associations, but its ancestral legends were unwontedly striking and numerous. It was none of your 'one-ghost houses,' as Mr. Lewis Carroll contemptuously terms them; but had several spiritual tenants, who had plenty of space to 'walk' in without interfering with one another. The Trevors had not been 'a happy family' in the way of domestic concord, and when there was peace at the Court it was commonly because the head of the house had made a desert there, by a clean sweep of his blood relations. There had been always someone—generally the heir—left out in the cold, to live on post-obits. When Jacobite and Hanoverian squabbles ceased to divide them, they flew to religion and quarrelled over that. The usual course of events was for the reigning baronet, for indeed he was a sort of king in those parts, after a tempestuous youth and a dissipated middle age to abjure his vices (because 'they had left him') and become a fanatic; and upon his son and heir declining to share his views (not being ripe for them just yet), to turn him out of doors.

None of the Trevors had been remarkable for intelligence, but they had never been commonplace; if one was a notorious

spendthrift, another restored the average by becoming a recluse and a miser; but moderation and the beaten track were unknown to them. Towards the end of the last century Sir Rowland Trevor had done his best to bring the race to ruin. He had of course quarrelled with his heir—the late Sir Marmaduke—and experienced not only the pleasure of spending, but the satisfaction of knowing that in so doing he was impoverishing a disobedient son, who would have liked to be as extravagant as himself. The manner of his life was still the favourite legend of the neighbourhood. When Sir Rowland travelled, it was in a coach and six with two postillions and a coachman, like the Lord Mayor in a Jubilee year. A phaeton and four followed with his suite, and then a 'chaise marine' (or fourgon) also with four horses, with his service of plate. A posse of outriders well armed with blunderbusses accompanied the cavalcade. When his hunters were led to exercise, their horse-cloths were of scarlet trimmed with silver, and to every bridle was attached a fox's brush. The hospitality of the Court was on a scale in proportion to this out-of-door ostentation, and the guests, who were mostly from town, cost the host far more than their keep, for he was habitually unlucky with cards and dice.

When Sir Rowland died—which happened very suddenly at the hazard-table—the Court was shut up for no less than twenty years, not merely untenanted, as it had lately been, but left to go to rack and ruin. There were those still living in Mirbridge who remembered it so, and especially the spectacle it presented when Sir Marmaduke gave orders for it to be opened and refitted; how the courtyard was a mere field of thistles, and cobwebs hung like stalactites from the roof of the great hall; how rooks and jackdaws occupied the chimneys, and flew about, blacker than common, in the drawing-room; and how the pigeons had built their nests above the books in the library. Almost everything the house had contained was utterly destroyed by damp and moth, except the Port and Madeira in the cellars. There were said to be three hundred dozens of black champagne there—not such as Goldsmith sings of, but champagne turned black and undrinkable. Where the money came from to refurnish the great house was never known; but there was a strange story that Sir Marmaduke had won it at Newmarket under exceptional circumstances. He was said to have risked his whole remaining fortune upon a single horse, and to have made a vow that if he 'pulled it off' (as it would now be called) he would thenceforth amend his ways. At all events, when he came to Mirbridge, it was in a quite new and unexpected character—that of a convert to the strictest sects of Pharisees. It was he who endowed the Calvinist chapel, of which we have heard Mr. Thorne complain as bitterly as his gentle nature per

mitted, and to which his predecessor, Mr. (now Canon) Spenser, had opposed himself with unavailing vehemence. The only satisfaction the latter derived from the matter was the knowledge that the Rev. John Smug, the minister of the tabernacle in question, did not find his patron much to his liking. There was, he used to complain, something still of 'the old man' about him, and very little of 'the new man.' The Baronet, in short, would sometimes forget he was converted, and apply the most striking anathemas of his new creed to secular purposes; in other words, he would swear like a trooper, even at the pastor himself. These bursts of passion, however, were always followed by fits of penitence, and such material reparation as compared very favourably with the ordinary offering of the elect. The gifts of Mr. Smug's one backslider were worth all those of his little army of saints put together.

What astonished those who saw Sir Marmaduke under his less favourable aspects, fully as much as how he had won his money, was how he had won his wife. The late Lady Trevor had been much younger than her husband, but the difference between their years was the least of the contrasts they presented. No gentler woman ever 'bore earth before her,' nor did convent walls contain one purer or more pious. She passed her life in acts of duty and benevolence, and was beloved by all. Sir Marmaduke's 'tantrums' subsided at the sound of her sweet voice, as those of Saul were tranquillized by David's harp-strings; and Mr. Smug himself, when under its influence, would forget that she was 'a brand,' and attended the parish church and not his chapel. In one thing only—which, however, was not discovered till after the event proved it—she was injudicious. Among her other benevolences was that of rescuing Letty Beeton from the bad influences of her home. The girl had shown such signs of intelligence and right feeling that Mr. Spenser had made her first pupil-teacher, and then the mistress of his village school, where in the daytime she lived in an atmosphere wholesome enough; but her father was given to drink, and her brother, even in those early days, to net the bird and snare the hare, and it was felt that such surroundings were not appropriate for an instructress of youth; so Lady Trevor had transferred Letty to the Court, where out of school-hours she acted as her private secretary. Then her son Richard had come home from College, and that escapade which had so scandalized the county had taken place. But with Sir Marmaduke and his wife, though they looked at it from different standpoints, it was something more than an escapade. It was a disgrace to the family, and also a judgment on it for sins that had hitherto escaped retribution. In the erring Richard, Sir Marmaduke beheld a counterpart of himself, as he had been in his unregenerate days—in the erring

Letty, Lady Trevor pictured a girl pure and passionless whom her own folly had thrown into the way of temptation, and for the wreck of whose soul she was answerable to her Maker. The young schoolmistress, who had taught so well and learnt so ill, was spirited away elsewhere as quietly as might be; but there were such terrible scenes at the Court between Sir Marmaduke and his son and heir, that it was thought the remembrance of them had been the chief cause of his prolonged absence from Mirbridge.

Then came the news of the death of Letty and her child, which the country cynics (who, however, had no information on the subject more trustworthy than was derived from putting themselves in place of Sir Marmaduke and his wife, and imagining how it would have struck *them*) described as having been borne by that worthy with a Christian serenity equal in its way to the philosophy displayed by Roger Beeton, who in losing a daughter had found a fortune. It was more probable that chagrin and regret were exhausted, since, when, to the amazement of all Mirbridge, Richard shortly afterwards took to himself a bride in France, the old couple—though such a union must have been hateful to both—were understood to have made no protest.

Sir Marmaduke and his son, however, never met again, and though on the former's death the Dowager Lady Trevor had resided till her own demise with her son and daughter-in-law, it was rumoured that there had been little cordiality between them. The truth of these matters depended, however, upon mere hearsay. For five-and-twenty years no inhabitant of Mirbridge had seen Sir Richard's face, and of those who could have been called familiar with him, scarcely any survived or remained. Old Mr. Shrapnel, for example, the parish-doctor, was dead, and had been succeeded by Mr. Wood, of whom we have heard something; and Mr. Spenser, the Rector, had been transferred to 'a wider sphere of usefulness'—a larger living with a canonry. Sir Richard's so-called neighbours—that is, of his own rank in life—lived at a considerable distance, and had naturally been better acquainted with his parents than with himself. Mr. Morris, the steward, indeed—though stricken in years—was still to the fore; but though he had been in pretty constant correspondence with Sir Richard since his father's death, he had known little or nothing of him personally as a young man. All the members of the household at the Court had been dismissed and pensioned off, except Cadman the butler, who had accepted the post of caretaker when the late Lady Trevor left the house, and the head-gardener. Cadman had now reassumed his old position, with an entirely new staff (including a new housekeeper, Mrs. Grange) selected by Mr. Morris.

All these good folks were interested enough to see what their good master and mistress would be like; but their excitement paled before that of the elder villagers, who longed to see what change years had wrought in 'Master Richard,' and especially to compare the consort he had brought back with him with their recollections of that fair member of their own community who had, so unhappily for herself and him, tempted his youthful fancy.

For the present only a transient opportunity was afforded them for observation; since the deputation at whose heels they had hoped to gain admission to the Court had been forbidden, or at best prorogued. The Rector had taken upon himself the thankless office of intermediary, and had explained to the tenantry how the state of Lady Trevor's health precluded their public reception. Nevertheless, when—as he thought it but an act of courtesy to do—he met the Baronet and his wife at the lodge-gates, and bade them welcome, it struck him that Sir Richard, and not her ladyship, was the invalid. They were both polite and cordial; but it was Lady Trevor who pressed him to enter the carriage and accompany them to the Court.

'You are more at home here than we are,' she said in her pretty English, which had just so much of foreign accent about it as gave it piquancy, and also a certain piteousness, 'and your presence will be our best introduction.'

'Yes, yes; a guarantee of one's personal identity,' laughed Sir Richard; and then began to cough and colour, like one with the asthma, who has made an exertion beyond his strength.

Hardly knowing whether he ought to accept so flattering an invitation or to decline it, the Rector took his seat opposite the new-comers.

'I understood from your letter this morning,' he said, 'that your son was to accompany you, Sir Richard?'

'So he does; but he left the carriage at Bridge Hill, and has, no doubt, come on in advance.'

Mr. Thorne had his own opinion upon that subject; if such an occurrence had happened, he would in fact have heard it from twenty lips; but though the young man's arrival had been delayed, there was no reason to suppose he had come to harm, nor, it was plain, did any such idea distress his parents. Sir Richard sat tapping the carriage door with his fingers in a manner that betrayed nervous impatience, though the postboys, true to their custom of 'keeping a gallop for the avenue,' were putting in their spurs, while Lady Trevor's eyes roved with animated curiosity towards the mansion, which was just coming into view.

'The approach,' observed the Rector, 'is very picturesque; is

it not? These oak trees are of quite a fabulous age; it is only a few country seats, in these hard times, that can boast of such trunks. They are like family jewels, which return no interest to their possessors.'

'Except the mistletoe,' observed Lady Trevor, smiling.

'To be sure, there is no such supply of mistletoe in all the country as grows in the avenue. It seems strange that you should have reminded me of that; it is such a thoroughly English product. But doubtless Sir Richard has described to you how all the lads and lassies at Christmas come to beg for the full-berried branches to decorate their homes.'

'Yes; I know almost as much about the old place and its surroundings as though I had been there. Sir Richard is never tired of talking of Mirbridge.'

'Mirbridge is glad, indeed, to welcome him back again,' said the Rector earnestly. He felt drawn towards her ladyship by the intelligent interest she showed in her husband's home. 'The deputation of the tenantry has been dispensed with at his own request, or you would have been convinced of his popularity by this time.'

'I hope they were not greatly disappointed,' observed Lady Trevor. 'I am afraid it was consideration for the state of my health that caused Sir Richard to forego the demonstration. There is however, I understand, some sort of festivity in the Four Acre.'

'Yes; a marquee has been erected there. How pleasant it sounds to hear you speak of our old field by its own name! As Sir Richard has doubtless told you, the Four Acre is always the scene of our jubilees. There the ox is roasted whole when a Trevor comes of age; there the bonfire is lit on Guy Fawkes' nights; there the cricket matches are played; and there to-day is held high festival in honour of your ladyship's arrival. It will be a pretty sight, and I venture to hope you will feel well enough to favour us—even if it be for only a few minutes—with your presence.'

'Now that I feel that I shall not be entirely among strangers, Mr. Thorne,' said Lady Trevor graciously, 'I shall certainly make the effort. I shall trust to you, mind, should my husband's memory fail, to make the necessary introductions.'

At this compliment the Rector, genuinely pleased, hastened to express his willingness to accept office.

'Now, to begin your duties as Master of the Ceremonies, Mr. Thorne, who is that old gentleman at the top of the steps yonder, with the servants in a cluster behind him? He looks dreadfully inclined to make a speech.'

'You have hit his desire to a nicety; but, nevertheless, he will not do so, as I have given him a hint that it would be un-

acceptable. That is Mr. Morris, your lawyer and land agent, whose presence warns me that I must take my leave of you till the afternoon.

'But why should you leave us?' urged Lady Trevor plaintively.

'It would be an infringement upon Mr. Morris's rights and privileges, as the Comptroller of the Household, did I remain,' said the Rector, smiling; and as the carriage drew up at the hall steps, and a footman came forward to open one of the carriage doors, Mr. Thorne let himself out at the other, and walked away unobserved amid the ceremonials of welcome.

If Lady Trevor had had for her object the making a friend of the Rector of Mirbridge at first sight, she had succeeded. Men are never so old but that a pretty woman, who, if not young, is still far from being so old as themselves, can make a favourable impression on them; and in the present case there was the additional charm of unexpectedness. Mr. Thorne was not of a nature to take a prejudice against anyone whom he had not seen; but, somehow, he had not looked forward to meeting Sir Richard's French wife with pleasure. But she had charmed him in spite of himself: her manner had been so frank and genial. She had invited and accepted his good offices so graciously, and shown such confidence in him, that he could not be otherwise than pleased with her.

There was something in Sir Richard—who perhaps had taken less notice of him than was quite courteous—which he did not understand; he had not only been preoccupied, but ill at ease; and it seemed to him that the lady had done her best to supply to him what was wanting in her lord. His interest, which at first had centred almost entirely in the husband, had veered round to the wife. That she was a Frenchwoman was of course a misfortune, but it was certainly not her fault. As compared with Mrs. Westrop and Lady Joddrell, the only ladies of equal position to her in the county that he knew, she was decidedly their superior both in looks and manner; while as for airs she had none. 'I think dear Amy will like her,' was the Rector's reflection: it was noteworthy he did not say 'I am sure,' which would have been the culmination of eulogy.

He had nearly reached the lodge gates, when suddenly a fine clear voice from the road without was heard singing a song he knew; it was a song his Lucy sung, and therefore dear to him, but otherwise it would not have been such a favourite; there were sentiments in it that he disapproved, or felt that he ought to disapprove; and it was certainly not a song that ought to be sung on the high road close to the mansion of the Lord of the Manor.

'Then here's good luck to Poaching,
Which I do think is fair;
Good luck to every gentleman
Who wants to buy a hare.
Bad luck to——'

'Hullo! I beg your pardon.'

The singer, a young man of two- or three-and-twenty, had turned out of the road and into the grounds with so much 'way' on, notwithstanding the call upon his breath necessitated by his vocal efforts, that he almost fell into the Rector's arms.

'Mr. Trevor, I presume,' said Mr. Thorne, smiling.

'Yes, sir. Dear me, but what a dreadful thing it would have been to come into collision with one's Rector on the first day of one's arrival,' observed the young fellow. He spoke gaily enough, but there was a certain gravity in his tone, too, which the occasion hardly seemed to warrant; it lent to the speech, however, a certain tone of apology in which it would otherwise have been lacking.

'Don't mention it; indeed, like the philosopher who did not mind being knocked down, but only objected to antagonistic ideas, it was not your own act, but the principles of your ditty which shocked me. I hope you have not been singing the praises of poaching as you came through the village.'

'No, sir; to tell the honest truth' (here the young man's eyes grew full of amusement), 'I picked up the tune on the high road half-an-hour ago, from one, as I suppose, of your own parishioners.'

'Indeed, then I fear you have got into bad company already; it must have been that audacious reprobate, Jack Beeton.'

'Perhaps,' said the young fellow; 'there was no regular introduction between us. I suppose, by-the-bye, you have seen my father and mother.'

'I have just parted from them at the Court yonder, which reminds me that I am depriving them of your company, Mr. Hugh; we shall meet again in the afternoon, no doubt, when there will be great doings in your honour.'

'I think not—that is to say, as to *my* honour,' replied the young man, still smiling, though by no means with such keen enjoyment. 'I am not Mr. Hugh Trevor, but only Mr. Charles, a very inferior branch of the family tree; though such as he is, entirely at your service, sir;' and with a sweep of his raised hat, he pursued his way.

CHAPTER VII.

COMING HOME.

MR. MORRIS, lawyer and land agent, stood hat in hand on the lowest step of the broad stone flight that led up to the house door. He was an iron-gray, keen-faced old man, of Herculean frame, who passed his days chiefly on a huge cob, riding from farm to farm on the Trevor estate, endeavouring to prove that nothing new was wanted in order to mitigate dilapidations. His suit of black waterproof, terminated by anti-gropelas, was generally splashed from head to heel, but on the present occasion it was clean and shining, and gave him the appearance of a beetle in the sun.

'Delighted to see you home again, Sir Richard,' he murmured, as the Baronet held out his hand; 'I should have known you anywhere, I'm sure, notwithstanding your long absence.'

It would have been an unfortunate remark, if genuine, for length of memory was not what Sir Richard just then desiderated in his vassals, but it was obviously a complimentary observation. The speaker stared at his employer as he made it, in a manner that could not be mistaken, and which gave the lie to his words.

'You are very kind to say so, Mr. Morris,' was the cold reply, 'but I am sorry to say I feel a good deal altered. Let me introduce you to Lady Trevor.'

The steward bowed almost to the ground, but with an eye nevertheless for her ladyship's hand, if she should be so good as to offer it, which, however, she omitted to do, contenting herself with a gracious smile of acknowledgment.

'Cadman, Sir Richard, you will recollect,' continued the land agent, introducing the chief butler, a person of great dignity, who, though he had passed so many years out of office, had not forgotten his old position, nor the deportment it demanded. His ample form, clothed in a new suit of black, surmounted with the stiffest of white neck-cloths, might have belonged to some well-beneficed ecclesiastic; nor was the expression of his countenance, which bespoke an unctuous patronage, out of keeping with that character. What Sir Richard, however, remembered best about him was the satisfaction he had always evinced as the bearer of any tidings of the nature of a catastrophe, for which he had the taste of a ghoul. One of Sir Richard's earliest recollections was Cadman's coming into the drawing-room, just as his nurse was about to carry his little self to bed, with the news that the Home Farm was on fire, which he announced as though it were a *feu de joie;* and again, how he had been the first to inform the family circle, with ill-concealed

delight, of Sir Marmaduke's favourite mare having strayed into the quarry and broken her back. Without the least malignity of disposition, and even with some genuine attachment to the house he served, it would secretly have given Mr. Cadman greater pleasure if his master, instead of arriving in a carriage and pair in tolerable health, had been brought home maimed, on a shutter. The present occasion being one of rejoicing, the ordinary impressiveness of the chief butler's manner was intensified by gloom.

'I hope I see you well, Sir Richard,' he murmured.

'As well as I can expect to be,' was the Baronet's grave rejoinder; at which Mr. Cadman rubbed his hands.

Things were not so very cheerful then, after all, was his inward reflection.

'I trust her ladyship is also well,' he continued.

'I am obliged to you, yes,' she replied, for herself. Her manner was certainly not conciliatory to the major-domo. He afterwards described it as being 'short, exceedingly short;' and 'very different from what that of his last lady had been.' What added to his annoyance, Lady Trevor showed herself affable enough to the rest of the household, though composed entirely of newcomers. Her greeting to Mrs. Grange, the housekeeper, was almost cordial. That personage, however, was not of the usual type; there was no stiffness or formality about her, no rustle of silk and jingling of keys. Her attire was as neat and simple as that of a hospital nurse. Her face wore the seal of truth. She was the widow of a farmer in the neighbourhood who had died suddenly. Their only son had been 'wild,' and left his home—it was reported to enlist; so that the farm had fallen into her hands, which were far too slight and delicate for its management. She was willing enough, after a sharp experience of loss, to part with the remainder of the lease, and to take the place at the Court which Mr. Morris had offered her. She had done her best to qualify herself for the post, though diffident of her own powers. She had studied the great house like a book, and, though she knew little about it of her own personal knowledge, was well acquainted with its history. It was not a show-place to demand any such acquaintance with it on her part for the benefit of visitors, but it had been represented to her that the information might be made useful to her new mistress. A woman of more experience of the world than Mrs. Grange would have wondered to see her ladyship arrive without a personal attendant of her own sex; but so far as the housekeeper was concerned, the statement of Mr. Morris, that Lady Trevor had parted with the whole of her late establishment in order that she should have none but English-speaking persons about her, was superfluous. Sir Richard's hint, that it

would be more agreeable to him if the servants should not be selected from the immediate neighbourhood of Mirbridge, had, as has been seen, been carried out; but, if this had been done with the intention of keeping the past out of remembrance, the precaution had failed in its effect. There was not an individual among them who had not been made acquainted with the circumstances under which their present master had left his home, twenty-five years ago; nor one of them belonging to the female sex who did not wonder within herself, as she curtsied to her new mistress, whether that elegant and gracious lady was equally well informed of the fact or not.

To Sir Richard, as he entered the great hall, it seemed but yesterday that he had seen it last, though under very different circumstances. In place of this crowd of supple-kneed dependents, there had not been one to take his valise to the hired vehicle that waited for him without to carry him away, as it had seemed for ever, from the home of his fathers.

It was very early on a summer morning, and his mother, in her dressing-gown, with pale face, and eyes heavy with tears but not with sleep, had alone risen to bid him farewell. It was almost a silent one. She had strained him to her breast, and said, 'God forgive you, Richard!' but even that as if she doubted His clemency. As to his earthly father, he well knew that pardon was not to be hoped for in that quarter. The blinds in his bedroom, which looked upon the courtyard, were drawn as though it had been a chamber of death; not a corner was raised to afford a furtive view of his only son for the last time. To Richard, though he bitterly repented of his wrong-doings, this had seemed not only harsh, but uncalled for. He did not understand, as his mother did, that the offence he had committed was a stumbling-block, not only in his own Heavenward way, but in that of his father also; for Sir Marmaduke had not only been expiating his vices for many years by asceticism and spiritual humiliation (though mitigated by outbursts of the 'old man') in his own proper person, but, as he flattered himself, in the education of his son, who had been brought up with extreme strictness at the feet of the Rev. John Smug. The Baronet would have offered him up as Abraham had offered Isaac on the altar; but the sacrifice had not been accepted by reason of the unworthiness of the victim. It was no wonder that the young man had understood nothing of this; and, though conscious of wickedness, he had also felt a sense of wrong. The sternness of his father had but little moved him in comparison with the grief of his mother. As he had parted from her in that very hall, he knew that he had wrecked her life as well as his own. They had met since, it was true; but the picture of her which he retained in his mind was, as she looked that morning,

heart-broken, hopeless, and bidding good-bye to the only joy that she had left on earth. That farewell now rang in his ears, and the conventional greeting of his household fell upon them almost unheeded.

'You should remember that I am a stranger here, Richard,' said his wife reproachfully.

She spoke in French, and even had there been anyone within earshot who understood that tongue, the remark would have seemed natural enough. She was not, however, finding fault with his forgetfulness of herself, but the common part they had to play.

'Pardon, Nannie,' he replied, in a tone that was genuinely apologetic, for, for the moment, he had in truth become oblivious of his wife's existence, 'we will go over the whole place together later on; but for the present Mrs. Grange will take charge of you, while you get rid of your travelling gear.'

This remark, though it had no such Machiavellian intention, was well fitted to the purpose the speaker had in view. To thus treat his lady—as though she were a child—was, in the eyes of the domestics, the very behaviour to be looked for in one who had married a foreigner, ignorant, poor soul, of all our English ways.

'This way, my lady, if you would like to see your room,' said the housekeeper, with a gesture of apology for taking precedence of her, as she led the way up the broad oak staircase.

It was high noonday, and even on the gloomy panelling of the old walls the sunshine blazed, and gave warmth and life to the family portraits that hung in the long corridor.

'That is Sir Richard's father, the late Sir Marmaduke,' observed the housekeeper, stopping at one which, though placed in an alcove almost out of sight, seemed to have attracted her mistress's eye.

'Indeed,' replied the lady,' putting up her *pince-nez*, with a show of interest; 'and why was he put up here, so genealogically out of the way, if one may judge by the dates?'

'It was his own wish, as I have heard,' answered the housekeeper, with a little hesitation. 'When the picture was first painted it hung yonder, at the end of the line—you can see where the frame made its mark on the wall—but in his latter days he had a great trouble, and became a recluse: then he would have even his portrait put out of the way.'

'Singular old man,' mused her ladyship, scanning the picture with minuteness, while Mrs. Grange looked on with secret horror. She had been obliged to answer her mistress's questions, but it was terrible to think that her first act of office had been to refer, however indirectly, to an incident which it was highly undesirable should ever reach her ladyship's ears.

She little guessed that that very matter was occupying her companion's thoughts as she gazed on the well-known canvas. It was an admirable likeness, taken a few years before Letty Beeton had come to the Court, and of course after the old Baronet's 'conversion.' His attire was sober in the extreme, and offered a strong contrast to the rich garments and gay colours in which the ancestors on either side of him seemed to have delighted, and which time itself had only half subdued; his grave face looked still more austere from the propinquity to those dissipated, not to say rakehelly, countenances, and yet there was a strong likeness in the old fellow to both of them, which the painter's instinct had forbidden him to conceal. Those precise, drawn-down lips seemed somehow not to have been always employed in psalm-singing, those eyes, though evidently now wrapped in celestial objects, had a glance in them yet which spoke of less spiritual matters. How well she remembered him, and his terrible breakings out, sometimes at the grooms, sometimes at the Rev. John Smug himself!

'Full of character that face,' was the critical verdict her ladyship uttered aloud as she dropped her *pince-nez*, and, to the housekeeper's great relief, passed away from that dangerous neighbourhood.

'This is her late ladyship's boudoir,' she said, opening a door on her left, and throwing it wide. Her intention had been to pass on after giving this view of it; but her companion, overlooking the gesture as it seemed, walked at once into the room thus disclosed and across it towards an inner door.

'Well, that's strange, indeed,' said the housekeeper, smiling; 'for, though your ladyship's bedroom is on the other side of the corridor, it was this one as was intended for you till Sir Richard gave orders to the contrary.'

She stepped forward and opened the door, on the very handle of which her mistress's fingers had been placed, and then nervously withdrawn.

'This is the late Lady Trevor's bedroom, and that is her picture over the mantelpiece, which your ladyship recognises, no doubt? it is thought to be as like as life.'

Her ladyship was in a state of nervous confusion, from which, for the moment, it seemed impossible to extricate herself. She felt like one who, lost in a forest, is compelled by despair to run on blindly. The association of ideas—the natural course of custom—had led her into the boudoir of her late mother-in-law, where she had passed a thousand happy hours—and one terrible one—and thence to that lady's bedroom, which, forgetting her husband's suggestion, she had naturally taken for granted was to be her own. The housekeeper's 'Well, that's strange,' while reminding her of her mistake, had also suggested its possible

consequences, and the contemplation of them had overwhelmed her. She had lost her head. To the other question about the portrait, 'Which your ladyship recognises, no doubt?' she absolutely knew not what to answer; whether it should be to say 'Yes,' or 'No.' The time which her companion supposed her to be giving to the consideration of the picture was, in fact, passed in a sort of vertigo, at the end of which she murmured, 'I do not see the likeness,' mainly because she *did*, and in a vague irrational way thought it safer to deny everything—whatever it might be—than to affirm it.

Not recognise it!—why, it was as if the dead woman herself was once more literally taking her by the hand in the village school-house, and saying in that sweet voice of hers, 'Letty, my dear, I think it would be better for you, since there is no one to look after you at home, to come and stay with me at the Court.' Not recognise it!—why, it seemed but yesterday that she had heard those smiling lips thank her for willing service done. Then suddenly she became conscious that the housekeeper had again addressed her, as a living voice breaks upon a dream, 'Well, that is only to be expected, my lady, since the portrait was painted more than a quarter of a century ago, and time makes a deal of change in everyone, whether they be gentle or simple.'

So it seemed that she had been right in saying she did not recognise the likeness, after all. But even then it took her some time to perceive how this was, and the position which the housekeeper occupied in the matter; an interval which, passed as it was in apparent scrutiny of the picture, was afterwards of great advantage to her.

'It was pretty and touching,' said the housekeeper, in narrating her mistress's home-coming, 'to see how her ladyship had hung over the portrait of her mother-in-law, and tried to figure to herself how it could be the same person whom she had only known old, and thin, and gray;' circumstances, the superior interest of which caused the speaker to forget how her mistress had first been led into the room at all.

It was a lesson, as regarded her future conduct, however, which Lady Trevor herself was not likely to forget. She had armed herself at all points, as she had flattered herself, for the battle that lay before her; voice and eye had been schooled beforehand to play their parts; but the mere promptings of natural instinct, born of old associations, she had not taken into the account, and these, as she now understood, were to be suspected and guarded against above all things.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL'S WELL AGAIN.

LIFE is not measured by its milestones, but by the kind of road that lies between them; for some of us it is macadamised, and for a very few there is even a wooden pavement laid down from our Land's End to our John o' Groats, without so much as a bump in it; but for the generality there are some 'bad bits.' We feel these more as we grow old, which is the reason why so many of us are seen 'to age' suddenly, but we feel them even in youth. When Lucy Thorne returned, from her walk up Bridge Hill that morning, she was not the same being that had left it. Her illness, though it had been a long and severe one, had left her pretty much the same light-hearted girl as it found her, but the hour's experience through which she had just passed, had made a woman of her. She did not recognise the change herself for what it was, but she knew that it had taken place; just as a man thrown from his horse may be conscious of injuries which he cannot describe.

Under ordinary circumstances, and considering the dearth of events in Mirbridge, she would certainly have at once sought her mother, and acquainted her with the little adventure they had just met with; whereas she preferred to go to her own room first, 'to take off her things.' When she got there, however, she threw herself into a chair without so much as undoing her bonnet-strings. One may know little of life, and yet be well aware that one has made a favourable impression on a fellow-creature. Lucy had been to one county-ball, to an archery meeting, and several lawn-tennis parties; she had danced with a Hussar; she had discussed the 'Christian Year' with a curate; and at last year's Flower Show she had listened to young Joddrell's description of a run with the hounds, till Clara (who had a faculty of interesting herself in the conversation of persons of distinction, which Lucy envied, but could not emulate) had come up and relieved her of him. But none of the young men she had ever seen at all resembled Mr. Hugh Trevor. Some of them might have been handsomer, but none so pleasant-looking and original, or at all events they had not made themselves so agreeable to her. There was a naturalness about him, which she had never seen in anyone but her father; perhaps it was his similarity to the Rector in this respect which had attracted her, though it had not struck her at the time. She felt sure that they would be great friends, and that Mr. Hugh would be often at the Rectory.

Her heart glowed for a moment at that thought, and then sank within her; for what would he see in her, even if he did

come, when there was Clara? Her sister had assured her that nothing like rivalry could ever occur between them, and that was only too true; she knew that she would have no chance with such an antagonist. Among the few public entertainments of which Lucy had been a witness, were the village 'sports' at Mirbridge, at which there was some excellent wrestling. One of the men who took part in the games was the champion, and when the others found themselves drawn by lot to oppose him, most of them had 'laid down' to him—*i.e.*, acknowledged themselves beaten—without a struggle, and similarly she would have to 'lie down' to Clara. It was true that Hugh Trevor had exhibited a marked preference for herself, and that her sister had apparently made no effort to win him away from her; but she well knew that Clara had only to make the effort, and in her heart of hearts she felt that she meant to do so. It was no instinct of jealousy that prompted this apprehension, but her knowledge of her sister's character.

Though reserved to most people, Clara had always been frankness itself to Lucy, and she knew that the set aim of her life was to make what she called a marriage. She had often talked about it, and in her patronising manner had often spoken of the happiness she would feel, after having gained her own position, in taking Lucy under her wing, and securing for her a similar advantage. The notion of a mutual affection in matrimonial matters seemed scarcely to have occurred to her mind. There was no objection to it, of course, but it seemed to her a very secondary consideration; the remembrance of this prevented Lucy deriving any satisfaction from the reflection that Hugh Trevor had not seemed to make a particularly favourable impression upon Clara; nay, it even made her own position more intolerable, for if Clara had liked him there would have been at least some feeling of self-sacrifice in giving him up to her; whereas to have to part with him to one who had no tender feelings towards him, but only mercenary ones, was without mitigation. Of course it was monstrous to think of such things concerning a young man whom she had only seen for an hour, but one can't help one's thoughts. Lucy had no animosity towards her sister; it seemed only in accordance with the fitness of things that her own wants and wishes should give way to hers; but it did seem rather hard. She felt that her withdrawal to her room would not be unnoticed; that her mother would wonder why she had left Clara to tell her of their meeting with Mr. Hugh Trevor, and not, as usual, contributed her share of harmless gossip; but somehow she shrank from seeing her mother.

Presently she heard her father's voice in the hall: she would not have had the same objection to seeing *him* had he been alone,

but she knew he would join Clara and her mother in the breakfast-room, and tell them the news they were so eager to hear. For her part, what Sir Richard and his wife might turn out to be no longer interested her, or rather only interested her so far as they were concerned with a third person. She had looked forward to their arrival with great eagerness, but now it seemed to her it would have been better if they had never come. She had been very happy in her quiet home at Mirbridge, but she felt that those days were over.

What sort of version, she wondered, had Clara given of their new acquaintance? To do her justice, it was likely to be a perfectly truthful one from her own point of view; but then, as she bitterly reflected, Clara could afford to be truthful. 'He is not much to my taste,' she would say to herself, 'but such as he is, I intend him to be my husband,' and from her mother at least she would not stoop to disguise her views. Poor Lucy had such an opinion of the masterfulness of her sister that even the preference she fancied Hugh had shown for herself went almost for nothing as a factor in the matter, albeit it was the cause of her wretchedness. Clara had always the first choice of everything pleasant, like the senior partner of a firm. If the case could have been set forth as it really stood, she could readily believe that her father would have put in his word for her: 'And why should not my little Lucy have her chance?' But he would never hear anything about it, and was the last person to guess. Clara possessed the art of hinting at delicate matters in a way that divested them of all vulgarity, while at the same time she expressed her views: but she herself had no such gifts. She would rather have died than have whispered to her mother the feelings which were at this moment agitating her; and indeed so far from being justified in indulging in them, were they not well-nigh discreditable? What right had she to think thus seriously of the attentions of a young man whom she had only set eyes on for the first time an hour ago? It was not indeed as if he had been a total stranger, for though unknown he had often been the theme of her sister's conversation; but still it was very premature and precipitate. In a day or two she would probably find that that manner of his which had so charmed her, because it seemed to have been adopted to please her, would be cast in another mould. It was foolish as well as blameworthy to think of him otherwise than as an agreeable acquaintance; her momentary intoxication had passed away, and she would not give way to such weakness any more.

As poor Lucy thus endeavoured to reason with herself, she heard her sister's slow and dignified step upon the stairs; and, throwing off her bonnet and cloak, she rushed to the looking-glass. As she had feared, her flushed face displayed the agita-

tion with which she had been moved. Nor would any man in her place have had the wit to conceal it. She instantly busied herself, however, in unlacing her boots, an occupation that accounts for blood to the head in any lady.

After a tap as light as a woodpecker's Clara entered serenely, and with a beaming smile. She was evidently not angry at having had to play the unaccustomed part of second fiddle in their recent excursion. It would have been unreasonable, indeed, if she had been so, since the alternative of playing the first had been in her power had she chosen to assert it. On the whole, Lucy would have preferred her to show some sign of annoyance. Such magnanimity seemed only the assertion of her superior strength.

'You have been a long time changing your boots, my dear,' were her sister's first words, spoken with sly significance, and as she drew near her sister, still engaged in that occupation, she patted her bent-down head. It was intolerable, thought Lucy, that Clara should not only thus patronise her as usual, but show by her manner that she was conscious of what had been distressing her; and it was with difficulty that she restrained herself from giving way to tears.

'Mamma has been full of questions, Lucy, about your young friend of Bridge Hill,' continued Clara, cheerfully, 'but I assure you I have been discretion itself.'

'My young friend!' cried Lucy, jumping up, with scarlet face, and speaking with great indignation, 'I really don't know what you mean.'

'I mean Mr. Trevor, of course; you took to him so very kindly, I thought; or, if you prefer it, let me say he took so very kindly to you—and you did not seem to resent it. Why should you then resent my saying so?'

This was just what Lucy could not tell her; and as her question remained unanswered, Clara went quietly on.

'I thought him a very pleasant young fellow myself, though I confess I was not so taken with him as you were: he is rather too undignified for my taste. For my part, I prefer a man conscious of his own importance, and of having a stake in the country; dull, because he has a right to be dull.'

She advanced to the mirror—an article of furniture which had as natural an attraction for her as a book to the bookworm—and regarded herself with complacency. Lucy looked at her with amazement. It was not her sister's nature to be cruel; she never played, even with her enemies, as a cat with a mouse.

'No,' here she took off her bonnet and smoothed a few truant hairs away, 'your young friend—if, as they say in the House of Commons, "you will allow me to call him so"—is too exacting for me; his spirits are at high pressure; he is not only amusing

—a doubtful gift, and somehow inconsistent with a really good position—but, also, he expects to be amused. You are very well qualified to fulfil his expectations in that way; but for me it would be a strain upon the intellect, demanding a sacrifice of one's own nature which would be only justified in the case of a most unexceptionable *parti*, which this gentleman certainly is *not*.'

'My dear Clara, how can you talk in that way?' said Lucy.

Her words were words of reproof; but her voice was as bright as that of a bird when the winter is over and gone.

'Because I think in that way; and to you, my dear, I talk as I think. I hope it will always be so. Why should we have any secrets from one another, we two?'

'Ah! why, indeed? Yet a few minutes ago it had seemed to Lucy that there was one whose very name she could never have uttered to her sister, and whose picture was to remain for ever in the sanctuary of her own heart, with its face, as it were, to the wall.

'Papa has come home full of praises of Lady Trevor. If I were mamma, or, rather, if you were mamma—for jealousy is not a weakness of mine—you would be downright jealous of her. She is quite beautiful still, he says, and has charming manners. Sir Richard—but that's only natural, for dear papa is but a man, after all—did not make so favourable impression on him. He does not seem to give himself much trouble to make himself agreeable. But that's nothing; I dare say with you and me it will be quite the other way. But what concerns you most is that, as papa left the Court, he came across our young friend, Mr. Charles.'

'Charles? You mean Hugh?'

'No, no,' there was a little spot over Clara's eyebrow, which, with the help of the looking-glass, she was carefully removing with her handkerchief, a delicate operation over which she paused, 'Charles was of course the one we met. He told us, you remember, he was in the law; whereas his elder brother, as is only right and proper, neither toils nor spins.'

'Sir Richard wrote to say they were bringing Hugh with them.'

'Very likely; but if so, the arrangement was altered. Hugh is not to be here for another day or two. In the meantime, I congratulate you upon your conquest. Papa actually came upon him still singing your favourite ditty, "The Poacher." He said he had learnt it from a parishioner of his he had met on the road, who, papa thinks, must have been Jack Beeton. He was quite concerned that the young man should have come across so unfavourable a specimen of his flock on his first arrival. Upon the whole I think it is just as well that you were not present when papa related the incident.'

Lucy agreed with her from the bottom of her heart, which had now as much remorse in it as happiness had left room for. How cruelly she had misjudged dear Clara! who, it seemed, after all, had not harboured a selfish thought. It was strange how she could have mistaken Charles for Hugh Trevor, when, as her sister had reminded her, he had distinctly alluded to himself as a barrister; whereas his brother had no profession. As for being rallied about him, which she would have resented in anyone else, that was only her sister's way, and it was useless, she knew, to contest it. Still, she did make some slight protest.

'What a ridiculous affair it has been from beginning to end!' she exclaimed.

'Let us say, in the beginning my dear, and hope that the end may be more serious,' observed Clara gravely. 'It certainly was not wise of you to select "The Poacher" as an opening melody. If it had happened to be the future Sir Hugh who overheard it, it would hardly have been a passport to his affections. *He*, of course, is all for the Game Laws; whereas, your audience of one, being a younger son, a ballad in opposition to the laws of the land captivated him at once.'

'How can you be so silly, Clara?'

'Silly? Come, you are not so diffident as to have persuaded yourself that the attraction was all on one side. *What? There was nothing on either side that you are aware of?* Then why did you fly at me like a tigress when I ventured to say I thought him rather audacious? Why did you not come in at once, as I did, to mamma, and narrate your little adventure? Because you could not trust yourself to do it. In describing how you met that most unretiring young gentleman, your voice would have broken with emotion. Why did you shut yourself up in your own room and do nothing but think about him, when you got there, for a quarter of an hour, till you heard my foot upon the stairs, which reminded you that you had not yet unlaced your boots? Because I don't take things that way myself, do you suppose I don't know how other girls take them? You are wondering, perhaps, why I do not congratulate you on your conquest?'

'I am doing nothing of the kind,' cried Lucy indignantly 'You are making me very angry, Clara.'

'No, I'm not; upon the whole, I am rather pleasing you, because I am corroborating your own views on the matter. Don't distress yourself about how it happened. Nobody can say you fished for him—he swallowed the hook without any bait at all upon it. The only doubt that presents itself to my mind, is whether it is worth your while to land him, or rather, if you have landed him, whether you should not throw him in again, as we throw in the dace and the bleak when we are fishing in the river. You heard what papa said about all the Trevor property

being entailed upon the eldest son. I don't know what Sir Marmaduke's savings may have been, but they can't have been much.'

'You are perfectly horrid, Clara.'

'I am glad it strikes you so, my dear, because in your present high-flown and sentimental state of mind that is a proof of my common sense. I cannot say I much approve of your *penchant* for this young gentleman, but he is better at all events than Dr. Wood. To poor girls in our position love is very much like the domestic game of pounce commerce—we must do the best we can for ourselves, and always keep changing one's hand, as the cards come round, for a better one. When the deal comes to an end we must "stand," of course; but, in the meantime, all arrangements should be more or less subject to change.'

'Clara you are positively shameless; I blush for you.'

'Thank you my dear; you do it very becomingly, I am sure. You must not however, come downstairs with that beautiful colour, or it may be thought you are blushing about somebody else. I have made, however, everything as easy for you as I can with respect to that matter. Mamma knows that he has produced a favourable impression upon you, and that is all. I am aware you think me much too calculating, but, on the other hand, you have too little self-command. We have somehow both missed "the golden mean," as papa calls old Austen. I wonder by-the-bye, if the worst had come to the worst, if I could ever have brought myself to marry old Austin?'

'A drunken farmer!'

'A gentleman farmer, if you please, my dear, a little close as regards money matters, and whose perverted taste leads him to prefer gin to claret, but who is reported to be the last rich agriculturist left in England. It would not have been a merry life, of course, but it would have been a short one—that is, for *him*. That's right, now I've shocked you. You wanted a douche. What a sister you have, who sacrifices even her own self-respect to be of service to you! Now put on your "hightems," which will be an excuse for your delaying so long in your room, for we are all to be in the Four Acre at two o'clock; then we shall see you-know-whom again, and, perhaps, his lovely mother, if her nerves will permit of it,' and with a pinch of her sister's ear—a sign of her being in high good-humour—Clara marched out of the room.

Lucy was always a little afraid of Clara; but never so much so as when that stately personage condescended to be mirthful, which only happened when she was alone with her. To the world at large she was cold and haughty, though without a spice of cynicism; but now and again she would favour her sister with outbursts of good-humour, which Lucy hardly knew

whether to take in jest or earnest. Perhaps they were mere escapes from the safety-valve; perhaps they had the serious motive of preparing the mind of the only person in the world she loved for some course, which she knew would have her disapproval, but which some day she might think proper to adopt. On the present occasion Clara's 'fun' had, at all events, had the effect she had professed to be its intention—that of a douche bath. It had so shocked her sister, that the remembrance of it cut short all reflections upon her own affairs, and did away with the embarrassment arising from self consciousness. She made her appearance below stairs, attired *en fête*, just in time for luncheon. Her mother only gave her a glance of approval, which said, 'You look very nice, my dear;' and her father remarked, in his bantering way, 'The aloe takes a long time to flower; but, when it does so, *dear me!*'

CHAPTER IX.

THE PAVILION.

The Four Acre was a straggling, undulating field, with a sort of table-land in the centre, sufficiently large and flat for cricketing. The games played upon it were of more than local importance, and at the top of the field was a permanent erection, called by courtesy 'the Pavilion,' where the elevens on both sides with certain spectators of position, were wont to be entertained on match-days. It was not, however, large enough for the festivities consequent upon the home-coming of Sir Richard and his wife; and, therefore, a tent had been built out of it, furnished with three parallel tables, upon which a profusion of refreshments suited to juvenile tastes had been set out by the Baronet's orders, but under the direction of Mrs. Thorne. To her it was owing that this simple meal had the appearance of a dinner *à la russe*, so plentifully was it adorned with fruit and flowers. The head-table, which was the prominent one, and dominated the others, though less gorgeous to the eye, was laden with more solid fare, designed for the tenants of the estate, among whom were the disappointed deputation: Jacob Austin, of the Home Farm, still distended, like an over-ripe pumpkin for whose seed there is no market, with his oft-conned speech; good-natured, easy-going John Wurzel, who had been living on his capital for the last ten years, with as much complacency as though it were dividends, and had still a hunter in his stable; and Ralph Ward, the Poor-Law guardian, who found an explanation for every form of depression, including that of the barometer, in the spread of what he called 'eddication.'

At two precisely the company sat down to their repast; but not till half an hour afterwards — such was the diplomatic arrangement of Mr. Morris—did the founder of the feast, with his lady on his arm, make his appearance. This was the signal not only for a great burst of cheering, but for the striking up of the village band with the pathetic strains of 'Oh, Willie, we have missed you.' Some of the tuneful nine (for, as it happened, that was their number) had been in favour of 'Rousseau's Dream,' as a pretty compliment to the nationality of her ladyship; but this had been overruled, chiefly by the opposition of the parish clerk, who had it on authority that Rousseau had been a Dissenter. It was really, as the *County Chronicle* subsequently described it, 'an exhilarating scene.' Flags of all nations, including those of the 'Odd Fellows' and the 'Village Foresters' Association,' waved from the summit of the Pavilion and of the tents. The roar of the tenantry mingled with the shrill voices of the children, like the noise of heavy guns with that of small arms. Ralph Ward, who had led the cheering, even threw his hat into the air, but not, it was noticed, recklessly; he suspended his emotion as it were, and withdrew his gaze from the objects of all this interest till he had caught it again. Even when on pleasure bent, Mr. Ward had a frugal mind. One little boy, Tommy Stokes, compelled to rise from his unfinished bun (the ninth) uttered a piercing cry: but it was drowned in the universal acclaim.

Sir Richard and his wife, followed by their son and the land-agent, had walked through the shrubbery, the gate of which opened on the Four Acre, but at a considerable distance from the Pavilion; and across this space the Rector now took his wife and daughters to welcome them. To the onlookers this made quite an historical picture, at which they cheered again.

'What a magnificent girl!' murmured Lady Trevor to her husband, as Clara drew nigh.

'Plenty of her indeed,' was the smothered rejoinder. The Baronet was in no mood for æsthetic admiration; the task before him was most unsuited to his taste and capacities; if he could have smoked his cigar, matters would have been more easy for him, but at a delicate hint from Mr. Morris he had just discarded that source of consolation. The last time he had been in that field he had worn cricketing flannels, and had made five runs, which had been a good average for him; from that very Pavilion he had slipped away during the luncheon-hour, and met Letty Beeton by appointment in 'the lovers' walk,' not two hundred yards away. It had been a day full of anxiety and apprehension and remorse—still there had been youth and hope in it, and possibilities of all kinds; now nothing was left to him but to gloss over the Irretrievable. Oh, woeful time, when the best we can expect is that the worst shall be hid! To some

men, even in old age, or when they have had warnings that they will never reach it, there are compensations. Their happiness is found in those they love. A forgotten line in reference to this suddenly recurred to his memory—'We go a-wooing in our boys'—and sent a shiver through him. He heard his wife speaking softly to Mrs. Thorne; he took off his hat, and put out his hand to that lady mechanically. He was conscious of a general purring of congratulation, and mustered up a smile.

'My second son, Charley,' said Lady Trevor, introducing him.

'My daughters have already had the pleasure of meeting you, I believe,' said Mrs. Thorne, as she shook hands with the young man.

Neither Sir Richard nor his wife understood this remark, nor, indeed, took any notice of it; their minds were preoccupied.

The little procession moved towards the pavilion; the elders first, the three young people following them. Clara calm and stately as usual; Lucy with a much brighter colour than ordinary; Charley, between them, with a roguish look. He seemed perfectly at his ease, and even amused.

'Did you observe how *very* careful my mother was to introduce me as her second son?' he observed, in a low voice, to Clara. 'One would have thought there were fourteen of us.'

'No one who sees Lady Trevor would suppose that,' was the quiet reply; 'she might well be taken for your elder sister.'

'Some people's elder sisters have a habit of snubbing them,' he answered, with a sly glance at Lucy, who turned away her head.

'What lovely daughters you have, Mrs. Thorne,' murmured Lady Trevor, in gracious tones, the music of which seemed more captivating from the foreign accent that lingered about them. 'I had no idea that Mirbridge could boast of so much beauty.'

'I hope it does not do that,' returned the Rector's wife, with a grave smile. 'They are good-looking girls enough, however, and, I think I may add, good girls.'

Lady Trevor's smile faded from her lips.

'If the face is an index of the mind,' she answered sententiously, 'it must be so.'

The two gentlemen did not exchange a word. Sir Richard's lips moved, indeed, but with no attempt at conversation; those thoughts of the past had left him for a little, and he was swearing softly to himself at the uncongenial task that lay before him. The smile suitable to the occasion was hard to fix, and dropped away from his lips like a misfitting eyeglass from beneath the brow.

'We have a larger attendance at the school than when you were here last, I fancy,' said the Rector, pointing to the long row

of children, all eye and ear, through which they were passing. 'The Government Inspector——'

'Which is he?' asked Sir Richard, looking vaguely about him.

'Nay, I was only about to say that he had been good enough, on his last visit to express his satisfaction with our numbers This is Mr. Wood, our excellent doctor.'

The good-looking young fellow, slim, prim, and a little over-dressed for Mirbridge, murmured his congratulations, while Sir Richard wondered to himself what would be the good of sending for a boy like that if anything serious—what he expected in short—should happen; he compared him to his disadvantage with old Dr. Shrapnel, his predecessor, who had rarely been seen divested of his gaiters, or off the back of his roan pony, but whom the whole country-side believed in, as an Indian tribe in their great medicine-man. He felt himself lost again in the mists of memory till the cheery voice of the Rector broke in upon his ear, with, 'And now you are amongst old friends, Sir Richard.'

He was, in fact, in the Pavilion, shaking hands mechanically on all sides with men it behoved him to recollect, but of whom he had scarcely any remembrance. Though brought up in the country, he had never taken to field sports, or made himself well acquainted, as most boys of his position are wont to do, with the local worthies. Old Austin, indeed, who was swinging his arm like a pump handle, and ejaculating, 'I am thankful to be spared to see this day,' Sir Richard, in the voice he used to his betters (for he had another for working folks), he did dimly call to mind as coming to the Court for compensation on account of damage done to his straw-yard by a fire-balloon which he (Richard) had sent up on a Guy Fawkes' Day. He remembered the scene in his father's study, and this man's whining plaint, like something out of an old play, which one has seen in youth, but wherein the actor is forgotten. Why the old farmer should be thankful for his return to Mirbridge he could not imagine—unless it was to be accounted for by a smell of spirits that hung about him.

Ralph Ward, to the best of his knowledge, he had never so much as seen; no doubt, however, he was mistaken; he resented the man's keen glance, full of curiosity and, as it seemed to him, even of suspicion; he could not guess, of course, that what the other was thinking to himself was whether this Sir Richard was the sort of man or not to take his place at the Board of Guardians, and become the first fiddle there, and in all other local affairs, *vice* Ralph Ward superseded.

Farmer Wurzel welcomed him with a genuine cordiality, 'Glad to see you amongst us at last, sir; dear heart, but you are changed a bit since you used to come a ratting in my great barn.'

This was a picture Sir Richard's memory could not reproduce; he had never to his recollection ratted anywhere, not even politically, but he thanked the beaming old fellow effusively, and assented to his observation that 'those were merry days.' As a matter of fact his boyhood had not been merry; he had been rather a reserved lad, and had also stood in fear of his father, whose ways—and no wonder—had been unintelligible to him. All the ardour of his youth had been, as it were, stored up till the first object of passion had presented itself, and his life seemed to have just begun where, in a manner, it had ended—it had been 'wrecked in port,' not on arrival but on starting.

All this time Lady Trevor had been engaged with the school-children, and very willingly; it had been a great stroke of good fortune that Mrs. Thorne had met her and separated her from Sir Richard. Their coming together would only have been too likely to awaken in some minds a fatal association of ideas. Though outwardly full of respect, every girl was saying to herself, 'so this is a Frenchwoman.' Her manner was artificial, and therefore seemed to them all the more natural.

'This is our schoolmistress, Miss Yorke,' said Mrs. Thorne. A tall, high-featured woman of middle age, demure and stern. Lady Trevor took her hand, and murmured something about the healthy looks of her young charges. This, then, was her successor, she was saying to herself, though doubtless after many intervening dynasties; there could certainly be no association of ideas in this case. Was it possible, she wondered, if something had not happened to change her lot, as completely as by a magician's wand, that she herself could have been this woman, living in an atmosphere of bread and butter, busied about good behaviour and cleanliness and prize-giving at Midsummer, and subservient to the clergyman and the lady of the manor?

As Miss Yorke's word of command—which Lady Trevor seemed to have uttered herself, it was so familiar to her—the children struck up a hymn, which she recognised as a favourite air in her own time. She could hardly prevent herself giving the time to it, as Miss Yorke was doing; her eyes involuntarily filled with tears. A little interruption fortunately took place, which drew attention away from her. Tommy Stokes had uttered a shrill scream. Upon being interrogated he had replied that something ached, and on its being suggested that in that case it was high time he should go home, he obstinately demurred. He was not going to give in to the offending something; as he expressed himself, 'it would ache a deal more before he had done with it.' The observation was drowned in a roar of laughter from Charley.

'That is true British pluck, my lad,' he said approvingly.

No one was curious to know what the little urchin had said,

while everyone applauded young Mr. Trevor's sentiments. It was clear that he at least was not French, an apprehension which it seemed had weighed on the public mind. His lady-mother might be as foreign as she pleased; the idea of her being so was, indeed, rather welcome, as giving a distinction to Mirbridge, but it was only fitting that her offspring should be 'a true Trevor.' This feeling was the more commendable, since the Trevors were in fact an exceptional family, with very few British characteristics about them.

As to her ladyship, the Mirbridge public were in much the same position for judging of her nationality as the witnesses in Edgar Poe's famous 'Murder in the Rue Morgue,' and came to the same conclusion. They all pronounced her to be a real Frenchwoman, but none of them had ever seen a Frenchwoman. On the other hand, her English—as was natural enough after so many years of marriage with an Englishman, though some who talked with her took credit to themselves for so easily understanding her—was perfectly intelligible. Her manner, though altogether different from the frankness of her son, was something more than affable: it was obvious that she wished to make herself agreeable to her new friends who were her husband's old ones. She put her little hand into the yeomen's huge palms with a charming confidence that they would not squeeze it; old Wurzel held it in both of his carefully hollowed out, as though it had been a canary. It must be confessed that her apparel assisted her in thus giving the impression of her being something rich and rare as well as entirely alien; it was more adapted for the Bois de Boulogne on a *fête* day than for Mirbridge Four Acre; but then it is difficult for a Frenchwoman to be overdressed; nor, indeed, did she seem to be so.

After all, however, this was a small success; it was like the rehearsal of amateur theatricals before the servants, which is no criterion of how things will go off on the morrow before the quality.

In Lady Trevor's case it was fated that this more crucial test should take place even earlier.

While the festivities were at their height, and just as Farmer Austin was about to give the toast of the day, Mr. Thorne whispered to Sir Richard that some lady friends of his had just arrived without, who would much like, if it was not interrupting matters, to have a few words with him. Lady Joddrell had driven over from Catesby Hall, and brought Mrs. Westrop, her friend and neighbour, with her. They were both in her ladyship's carriage on the Four Acre; but as they had no gentlemen with them, they were a little shy of coming into the Pavilion.

Sir Richard remembered them very well, though neither of them as being 'shy'—and wished them at York, or even further,

To judge by the Rector's face, at an ejaculation the Baronet involuntarily uttered at the news, it is possible that he even signified as much.

'They were accidentally driving through the village,' explained Mr. Thorne apologetically, 'and could not resist a visit to the scene of rejoicing,' with which both ladies had remarked they so entirely sympathized.

'No doubt,' said Richard dryly.

If hours had not changed in the county, it struck him that Lady Joddrell ought to be still at lunch in Catesby Hall; nothing, too, but curiosity could have brought Mrs. Westrop out at such an early hour; gossip was meat and drink to the latter lady, and it was a pity, on certain occasions, it was not also clothing. He recollected her appearance at the last county ball he had attended when a young man; a woman of forty-five, who dressed—or the reverse—as if she was a young woman. His mother had always disliked her, and had not been on friendly terms with the other lady.

'They promised they would not detain you two minutes,' urged the Rector mildly.

'Very good, I'll go,' said Sir Richard.

And he went, though with a frowning brow, as well befitted a feudal lord interrupted in the revels of a devoted tenantry.

CHAPTER X.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

As Sir Richard had shrewdly concluded, it was not quite by accident that his two lady visitors had found themselves that day at Mirbridge. They had heard of the festivities that were to welcome his return to the home of his ancestors, and it had struck them that these would afford an opportunity of seeing him, and especially his wife, some days before it would be quite *en régle* to make a formal call upon them. This would give them a clear start before the rest of 'the county,' which, in the matter of gossip, was almost as much to be desiderated as is 'early intelligence,' by the newspapers. Lady Joddrell had a large family, including several daughters of a marriageable age, and was already willing not only to take a favourable view of her old friend Sir Richard and his interesting wife, but to see virtues in their eldest son, and to take a charitable view of whatever might be amiss with *him*. Mrs. Westrop, a widow like herself, but childless, was actuated by no such personal considerations, but ready to pass her unprejudiced judgment—or at all events a judgment that was seldom prejudiced in anybody's favour—upon the new-comers. Lady Joddrell would not have brought

her if she could have helped it, but she had invited herself, and to decline her company would not only have been rude (which she would have risked), but dangerous. That her friend would impute an interested motive to her expedition would happen in any case ; but she hoped by this act of civility to prevent her communicating that idea to the public at large. Her ladyship was a dull, commonplace woman, with high and mighty notions of her 'position ;' though advanced in years, her figure was still slight ; her features were aristocratic, but of that feeble and washed out kind which is as characteristic perhaps of her class, as those nobler traits with which so many writers of fiction have made us familiar.

Mrs. Westrop was of equal birth and breeding, but with much more of character about her than her companion, though of a sort which in a lower rank of life would not have been to her advantage. In her youth she had been very handsome, but her good looks had always been of the convivial type, and she had now become exceedingly coarse and stout. What she had lost in beauty, she endeavoured to make up in boldness, and she would 'say things' even in the presence of gentlemen that made Lady Joddrell wince. She had travelled and seen a great deal of life, or what she understood to be such ; as a girl she had been an heiress ; as a woman she had been borne on the foremost wave of fashion for a brief space, not in London only, but in Paris, a distinction which her husband had conferred upon her at the cost of almost her entire fortune. She would speak of him in moments of confidence, with a strange mixture of admiration and contempt, as 'the most charming companion and greatest blackguard in all England.' Although reckless of tongue, she was by no means of an illnatured disposition, however, and if more feared than liked, was not without her friends.

As Sir Richard approached these ladies, Mrs. Westrop whispered to her companion, 'Good heavens! what a wreck!' To which her ladyship replied, in the same cautious key, 'I should not have known him from Adam.' Both, however, received him with a great show of cordiality.

'This is not a morning call, remember, dear Sir Richard,' said Lady Joddrell as they shook hands.

He knew very well that it was not, and groaned in spirit to think that the whole thing would have to come over again.

'But, finding ourselves in the village, we could not forbear to join our congratulations to those of your nearer neighbours.'

'The last time you came to my house,' said Mrs. Westrop, 'you were a naughty boy about so high,' touching the wheel of the carriage, 'and you amused yourself, while your father and mother were being very polite to me in the drawing-room, with destroying the nests of my favourite swallows with the garden engine.'

'I hope I was never such a wicked boy as that, Mrs. Westrop.'

'You were not so wicked as when you became a young man, of course,' she answered, with a very significant look; 'but you were a bad boy. Now, however, I am quite sure you are come back like the Prodigal—only I hope better off—quite determined to behave yourself properly. Everybody is looking to you for an example, for the wild boys always turn out the best men, if they only live long enough; and also to teach us French.'

This was a sharp slap at her companion, who was no better versed in French than most ladies of quality; indeed, Mrs. Westrop herself had almost a monopoly of that tongue in the county.

Lady Joddrell, who was no coward, took up at once such weapons as she could lay her hands on.

'I am as well convinced as you can be, my dear, that Sir Richard will be everything he ought to be; but, as one who has boys of her own, I must demur to your philosophy. It is not everyone who retrieves his youthful indiscretions. ("Confound her impudence," muttered Sir Richard.) "A youth of folly," we are told, is but too often followed by "an old age of cards."'

Mrs. Westrop burst into laughter that would have befitted Moll Flagon.

'That is a hit at me, Sir Richard, because I won ten shillings of her dear Johnny at whist last night—a game the young man should never venture to indulge in; you mistake the poet's remark altogether, my dear, which is in fact an antithesis: "A youth of folly, an old age of cards," means a wasted youth *redeemed* by the sagacity and wisdom displayed in the management of trumps.'

'A very ingenious interpretation,' said Sir Richard, smiling in spite of himself; he felt inclined to add, 'You were always a great commentator,' but fortunately restrained himself. It was of immense importance to him, he felt, to have this sharp-tongued gossip on his side.

'And when *may* I come,' inquired Lady Joddrell earnestly, 'to offer my congratulations to yourself and Lady Trevor in form? I can easily imagine that every moment of your time is just now taken up.'

The lady had made up her mind that her present companion should not accompany her on the visit in question, which she proposed to herself should not be one only of ceremony.

'That is all very well for *you*, my dear,' put in Mrs. Westrop, who, it is possible, had fathomed this intention, 'but I am a poor creature (though I have seen better days) who have not the same means of locomotion; the expedition would cost me a fly. Since we *are* here, could not Lady Trevor be so good as to see us for two minutes and receive our homage?'

The proposal rather staggered Sir Richard. His wife had enough to do for one day, to play her part before her present audience; but, on the other hand, there was danger in saying 'No.' It was, above all thing, necessary that she should show no sign of fear—that there should be no shrinking from publicity. And if the thing could be done, and well done, it would be well to get it over. Strange to say, he felt no anger against Mrs. Westrop for her request. There was a streak in her character—notwithstanding, or even perhaps because of its eccentricity—which recommended itself to something in his.

'Your poor wife must be so tired,' murmured Lady Joddrell; 'I think it would be rather exacting.'

'What does *he* say? That's the point,' said Mrs. Westrop, nodding sideways at the Baronet, as though he had been an inanimate object in the landscape.

'Nannie shall answer for herself,' he said good-naturedly, 'if you will kindly wait a minute.'

'He called her Nanny!' exclaimed Lady Joddrell in amazement, as soon as he was out of earshot. 'Then she must be an Englishwoman after all.'

'No, no; he said "Nannie"—her name must be Nanette, I suppose!' exclaimed Mrs. Westrop. 'Not that I should be astonished if she turned out to be a Hindoo. Nothing that a Trevor did would ever surprise me; there is madness in the blood.'

'I have never heard that said before,' said Lady Joddrell rebukefully.

'Oh, I don't mean to say that they ought to be shut up, and not allowed to marry,' returned the other significantly. 'Come, here she is; and what a fine young fellow she is bringing with her. Her son, no doubt.'

Sir Richard was in fact bringing both his wife and Charley to introduce them to his old friends.

'This is not a morning call,' began Lady Joddrell; for, having once got a good formula into her head, she was as careful of it as wiser people are of their ideas.

'It is a much more welcome sort of visit,' replied Lady Trevor, in her pretty broken tones,' because it is less formal.'

Then ensued the usual smiling and bowing among the ladies.

'We are so glad to see you back again, Lady Trevor—I mean, of course, Sir Richard back, and you amongst us,' continued her ladyship.

'And as for you, Mr. Charles,' said Mrs. Westrop, with a nod and a smile,' 'there are a great many young people hereabouts, I can assure you, who are on the tip-toe of expectation about you.'

'I am afraid they will come down upon their heels when they come to know me,' said Charley, with his ready laugh.

'They will, if you are at all witty, I promise you. We answer "to the purpose—easy things to understand," in this neighbourhood,' was the grim rejoinder. 'Well, I hope you will be better behaved than your father.'

'Well, upon my word! cried Lady Joddrell. 'I think you should remember, Mrs. Westrop, that though Sir Richard knows you, and that you never mean anything you say, Lady Trevor has not that advantage.'

'Tut, tut; I didn't mean *that*—you are always thinking of something that you shouldn't. What I was about to say was that I hoped the young man wouldn't leave us for twenty-five years at a time like Sir Richard, or when *he* comes back again he'll find some of us quite middle-aged.'

'I hope he will have no reason for leaving us,' said Lady Joddrell benignly. Then she turned scarlet—Mrs. Westrop had trodden heavily on her toe.

'I hope not, indeed. It will depend, of course, upon how we treat him. I intend to be very kind to him for one,' put in the latter lady quickly.

Lady Trevor looked from one to the other smiling, 'with alien lips,' as a good-natured foreigner should do when the conversation is unintelligible.

'They must have got some curaçoa in the carriage,' was Sir Richard's reflection.

As for Charley, the little tiff between the old ladies afforded him, like most other things, its quota of amusement.

Mrs. Westrop, though she had helped her companion out of her difficulty, was indeed not a little annoyed at having been taken to task by her, and the more so because she felt that she had justly exposed herself to rebuke. A method of revenge, characteristic of her sex, suddenly occurred to her. She addressed Lady Trevor in the French language, by that means cutting off her enemy's communications with completeness.

'I am afraid you will find it very dull here after Paris; for I conclude you come from there. I am quite sure that beautiful locket of yours did.'

'My locket, yes. It was a present from my husband on my birthday,' was the modest reply. 'But, as for myself, I have only visited Paris occasionally. We lived, as I dare say you have heard, at Minard, which is a long way from the capital.'

This reply was well conceived in some respects, but encumbered with unnecessary details. When we have anything to conceal, we should never volunteer data.

'You say, "as we have heard,"' returned Mrs. Westrop frankly; 'but the fact is, we know nothing about you; we only suspect. For years we have been dependent for information upon our own invention.'

'And what do you suspect?' inquired Lady Trevor good-humouredly.

'It is impossible to say; there have been so many things said. You know what sort of work amateurs make of fiction, even when they have a story to tell. Now, we have had absolutely nothing to go upon except what we know of Sir Richard. We had to picture his wife as we supposed she would be, and, as it turns out, we were all wrong.'

'You arouse my curiosity immensely; what sort of person was it you expected?'

'Nay,' said Mrs. Westrop, dropping her voice, 'that is a question I must not answer to-day; but I feel sure we shall soon be good friends, and then I will tell you all about it. One of the reasons why I love your nation is that, with all their reputation for tact, they are the frankest people upon earth in the very matters on which what we call decent, that is prudish, folks are reticent. My good friend here, for example, will some day endeavour to persuade you that her deceased eldest son was a saint: the form of martyrdom he suffered was the being pitched head foremost from his horse, because he was too drunk to stick on his back; but you will use no such duplicity with me, I know. If wives or widows (which is the same thing, only better) cannot tell the truth to one another, we are to be pitied indeed.'

'But I'm afraid there's nothing very shocking to confess about Sir Richard's misdeeds,' laughed Lady Trevor.

'Then you are exceptionally fortunate, my dear, or, which is the more probable, in a most blissful state of ignorance. What used to annoy, but now only amuses me, is the effrontery of mankind; they have actually contrived to persuade themselves —and, what is stranger still, even our own sex—that we women are worse than they are. Now, you must not talk to me any more, or else it will be taken for granted that you and I are already plotting together against the proprieties of the county.'

If this was so, it was rather hard upon her fellow-conspirator, whom Mrs. Westrop had button-holed—or rather hooked-and-eyed—in spite of herself; yet it seemed probable from the glances cast at them by Lady Joddrell that some such suspicion had really been awakened. She had, it is true, in the meantime been carrying on conversation with the two gentlemen, but in a half-hearted manner; she had impressed upon the younger that 'her dear John' was eager to welcome him at Catesby, where there was good fishing on the lake, and the best tennis-ground in Derbyshire. She had reminded the elder, not unnecessarily (for he only dimly remembered him), how warm had been the regard of her late husband for himself in years gone by. 'Let us take up the threads of our friendship where they were dropped,' she entreated plaintively.

This would have been rather a delicate operation, since the 'dropping'—of all communication between the Court and the Hall—had taken place on account of a remonstrance she had addressed to the late Lady Trevor, upon her making so much of 'that exceedingly dangerous and forward young person,' Letty Beeton; a piece of advice which, since it had turned out to be well founded, had naturally never been forgiven her. If however, which was highly improbable, the deceased lady had communicated this fact to her daughter-in-law, it was not likely to have prejudiced her against Lady Joddrell, but rather the reverse; and it irritated her exceedingly to see Mrs. Westrop making all the running with the new arrival on the course, beset as it was with 'bullfinches'—long words in the French language—over which she could not accompany her.

It humiliated her not a little, when Lady Trevor at last turned her attention to her, and the two gentlemen were taken in hand by Mrs. Westrop in her turn, to have to admit that her French was a little 'rusty;' to which the other judiciously replied that conversation in English was much more agreeable to her as being her adopted tongue.

'But how well you speak it!' exclaimed Lady Joddrell in amazement.

'No better, I conjecture, than you would speak French, if you had been used to it for a quarter of a century.'

'Quite true; I had forgotten how time flies. But you have certainly no excuse for wishing to learn English, and therefore I must ask you sometimes to converse in your own tongue with my dearest Viola, who dotes on French, and desires above all things to improve herself in it.'

'I shall be happy to be her governess so far,' said Lady Trevor meekly; 'how old is your daughter?'

'Viola, the eldest—for I have quite a quiver full of them, you must know—is three-and-twenty; just the same age, by-the-bye, if I remember right, as your eldest son yonder.'

'That is my second son; Hugh is my eldest; he is not yet come down to Mirbridge.'

'Oh, indeed!'

Lady Joddrell strove to make her tone one of absolute indifference; but the sense that she had 'wasted' herself was overpowering. She had always heard that Frenchwomen were so clever, but could anything be more stupid than the way in which she had been suffered to fall into this mistake? The Mirbridge estate, as everyone knew, was strictly entailed; and yet she had been actually pressing this younger Trevor—a very poor match, if not absolutely 'a detrimental'—to come to Catesby, fishing!

Tennis is not a very dangerous game from a matrimonial point

of view; the players are too much out of breath for the interchange of soft nothings; but the opportunities during punt-fishing—her John could never be got into the boat (he said it was 'so slow') which indeed it was compelled to be—are enormous.

From that moment, in spite of all Lady Joddrell's efforts to maintain it, conversation languished, and, indeed, considering the occasion, the time of the party from the Court had been monopolized long enough.

'I must really not detain you from your Mirbridge friends any longer,' she presently murmured.

Up to the moment of that unfortunate disclosure, Lady Joddrell had been favourably impressed by her new neighbour, and she had thought her not only ladylike, but with a very striking style; her attire, though truly admirable, had not aroused her envy; it was only to be expected that the newcomer should have done her very best in that way to establish her position; whereas in her own case no such supreme efforts were necessary; whatever Lady Joddrell of Catesby Hall chose to put on became *ipso facto* the fashion; but she could not quite forget the involuntary deception Lady Trevor had practised upon her..

'Well, my dear Mrs. Westrop, and what do you think of the new arrival?' she inquired of her companion, as soon as the carriage began to move homewards. 'Is she to be an acquisition or not?'

'An acquisition is not quite the word,' returned the other thoughtfully; 'she will, unless I am much mistaken, not hang on anybody's skirts, but will take a line of her own.'

Her ladyship only made that inarticulate rejoinder which is translated in books by the term 'Humph!' but which has all the significance attributed to the 'Ugh!' of the North American Indian. What it meant in this case was, 'I am sorry to hear it; we don't want a *second* person in the county who is bent on taking a line of her own.'

'Yes, my dear,' continued Mrs. Westrop remorselessly, 'if you are thinking of shaping Lady Trevor into any mould of your own devising, you will find it labour lost. Of course, she will never interfere with your sovereignty, but she will form an independent state, and decline to do homage to anybody. For my part, as a quiet, inoffensive woman, who seeks no prominence, and is unambitious of hard knocks, I mean to be friends with her.'

'Well, of course,' assented her ladyship. 'But what did you think of her French? Had it the true Parisian accent?'

'So far as I can judge, I should say "no."'

'Ah!' was the triumphant rejoinder, 'I thought as much.'

'At the same time, if that is what you are thinking about, we must remember she is not a Parisian; she has a provincial accent

like ourselves, who, I suppose, for example, don't make *v*'s of our *w*'s like Londoners.'

'Good gracious, I hope not!' exclaimed Lady Joddrell.

The suggestion was so offensive that she dropped the subject without perceiving what was amiss in her friend's argument; and Mrs. Westrop did not think it worth while to resume it. She had, however, drawn certain conclusions of her own from the fact in question. Among them was this reflection:

'When once a man marries beneath him, or wants to do it, which is the same thing as regards his natural bent, he is pretty sure, if he has the chance, to do it again.'

CHAPTER XI.

FARMER AUSTIN'S SPEECH.

THE temporary absence of Sir Richard and his family from the tent had untied the tongues of its inmates. Having once beheld their new lord and his belongings, their sluggish minds, which could no more imagine a subject than Eton boys (at least it was so in my time) can make Latin verses until their tutor starts them with an idea, had now something to go upon, and they went. A great deal of confused criticism had set in at the table of the village magnates—not exactly what is termed in journalistic circles 'log-rolling,' but still of a eulogistic kind. There was what is termed in Parliament (so called, perhaps, from its delight in long words) 'a general consensus of opinion' that, for a Frenchwoman, Lady Trevor was 'a good sort,' while Charley's free-and-easy manners and pleasant smile had carried all hearts by storm. Curiously enough, with Sir Richard, whom they had known before, they did not feel so much at home. Indeed, with those who were old enough to recollect him, that circumstance was against him rather than otherwise. He had never been hand and glove with them—nor even glove—and it was not likely that his foreign experiences had made him 'more kin' to Mirbridge. To the rest he was not only novel, but inexplicable, and, on the whole, unsatisfactory. His careworn face so prematurely old-looking, his manners so studiously civil and yet so strained, the anxiety that displayed itself even in the very acknowledgment of their felicitations, and above all, that appearance of intense boredom with the whole proceedings, all his efforts could not conceal, but which was fortunately set down to ill-health—for it seemed out of reason that a man should not be pleased with what was done in his own honour—weighed him down in the scale of public opinion.

For the first time since the disappointment of the morning, Farmer Austin congratulated himself that he had not let off his oft-conned speech. It had been naturally devoted to Sir

Richard himself, had painted the happiness of his neighbours at seeing him once more among them and in his proper place, which it went on to imply was, on the whole, on horseback ; it had assured him that if he took the hounds—the pack had been broken up on its late master's death, and was distributed among the yeomen in the neighbourhood—there was not a farmer who would shut his gate against him. But it would have been clearly ridiculous to have spoken in that way of a man who wore polished leather shoes and a double eyeglass. It was the same with the joys he had foreseen for him in the way of shooting. 'How can a man walk through a turnip-field in *those* things?' was the natural reflection. At the same time, this good man—who was ignorant of the cheering fact Science has discovered, that Force is never wasted, but spends itself somewhere (let us hope in some higher sphere)—was naturally loth that his eloquence should be altogether lost. Emboldened by the absence of the original subject of his eulogy, he therefore rose to his feet amid deafening cheers, and proceeding to piece together such fragments of his speech as his memory could collect, transferred with admirable ingenuity what was so plainly inappropriate to his landlord to his landlord's son.

'Sir Richard,' he said, 'they all knew, was by nature not only just but liberal. Many of those present remembered his generosity as a young man (and, indeed, Master Richard had been free-handed enough), and now that he had come home to look after things for himself (a hit at Mr. Morris, the agent, who was by no means popular), he (the speaker) was well convinced that it would turn out to be a happy day for Mirbridge. Repairs would be more fairly attended to and improvements allowed for.' ('Hear, hear,' from the farmers, and 'There's nothing like leather' from the veterinary surgeon, who had no land, and was of a cynical disposition.) 'Well, that being so' (here the excisions began), 'he, Jacob Austin, had said enough upon that point. He was glad to think that Sir Richard had brought home a wife as seemed every way worthy of him.' (Tremendous cheers.) 'She was a lady, every inch of her, that was certain' (here ensued a general murmur of assent). 'It was said that the fine feast—finer than the Four Acre Field had ever seen yet—provided for the school elsewhere, had been especially ordered by her ladyship. Buns with sugar on 'em, and dried fruits as was not to be got in every shop' (shrill cheers from the juveniles, who had by this time cleared the board, and recovered speech though not motion; they were 'todged'). 'Well, that was a nice thing to do. It wasn't every young man that made a good choice in his wife ; some was only taken by good looks.' (Here it suddenly struck the orator he was entering on dangerous ground ; he was greatly relieved to hear the voice

of the cynic inquiring, 'How do *you* know? You are a bachelor, Jacob.' The old farmer did not mind chaff—holding that commodity at its market value—and the personal reflection was at all events greatly preferable to the mind of 'the vet.' having taken the same direction as his own.) 'Well, there was something more than good looks in her ladyship, though there was plenty of them too; and then look at their son, who, many years hence let us hope—yes, "when I'm grassed over," as Mr. Vet. yonder is good enough to observe—will reign in his father's place. He will be one, if I am not much mistaken, as Mirbridge will delight to honour.' (Here the cheering greatly increased, as the object of eulogy reappeared with his parents in the tent.) 'One knows a good fellow when one sees him, independent of the cut of his coat. Not as Mr. Hugh's coat yonder is not better cut than mine by a good deal, I dare say.' (Here were roars of laughter, interspersed with personal allusion. 'Well done, Farmer Austin!' 'What'll Shearwell,' his tailor, 'say to that?') 'I say, here's a young man as will do Mirbridge credit; fit to hunt the county.'

An extempore discourse has this undeniable advantage (as far as its hearers are concerned) over its otherwise equally terrible rival the lecture, that it is subject to slips and disasters, which may considerably relieve the weariness with which one listens to it, and in this way Farmer Austin, meaning to make a speech, had really been giving an entertainment. To those who were acquainted with the real state of affairs, the position was indeed supremely ridiculous. The news that Sir Richard and his wife were to be accompanied by their elder son had filtered down from the Rectory in the morning, and had received no public contradiction. Farmer Austin, like the great majority of those present, had no suspicion that he was welcoming Charles Trevor, and not his brother Hugh. Those who were in the secret were naturally the more tickled by the happy ignorance of the rest. Lucy Thorne in particular, with her handkerchief before her face, was half stifled with laughter at the old farmer's mistake, which, since it involved a eulogy upon her new acquaintance, was by no means displeasing to her. Clara, on the other hand, maintained an impassive demeanour. She was watching Lady Trevor very closely, and, perceiving she was greatly annoyed, felt not a little sympathy for her. She did not approve of Mr. Charles getting all this praise, however innocently, on false pretences. The Rector and his wife were exceedingly uncomfortable from the same cause, though without sharing her indignation. The orator, unconscious of error, continued to apply the eulogiums once intended for Sir Richard to his second son, to whom they were still more inappropriate, till Mr. Morris, finding his way towards him through the crowd, whispered what was amiss

in his ear, which caused him to fall back into his chair—looking as ridiculously helpless as a horse in a ditch—with his heels in the air.

At this crisis the band struck up—not harmoniously, by reason of some of them laughing through their instruments—but very opportunely. None the less, however, for its abrupt termination (which was generally attributed to liquor), the speech was considered a great success, and to bring matters to a triumphant conclusion.

Charley Trevor laughed till the tears came into his eyes, but not at the farmer's losing his legs. 'Not till you have seen my brother,' he whispered to Lucy, 'will you properly appreciate the intense humour of our eloquent friend's error. That notion of Hugh's "hunting the county" was almost the death of me.'

Lucy looked grave at this. It was a remark, she felt, that should not have been made to her; but she was not so much annoyed about it on her own account as distressed at the feeling which it displayed in the speaker towards his elder brother. She was already sufficiently interested in this young fellow to deplore in him what seemed to be any jealousy or 'littleness,' and this was not the first time he had exhibited that weakness. A vague determination crossed her mind that if they should grow better acquainted (which seemed possible), she would one day give him a lecture upon this subject. At present, of course, this was out of the question; and, indeed, Mr. Charles had not waited for any reply from her, but had already turned his attention to her mother.

He was saying something pretty about the admirable arrangements of the whole feast, and the credit due to her for them.

'When one has *carte blanche*—which your father so generously gave us'—she modestly replied, 'it is very easy to do things well, Mr. Charles.'

'Is it? Well, I have never had the opportunity myself—that is if *carte blanche* means a blank cheque—of testing the thing,' he answered, laughing; 'but I think there must be difficulty about it, or there would not be so much waste without taste.'

The neatness of the phrase pleased the Vicar no less than its sentiment pleased his wife. It naturally afforded them satisfaction to find the young man accompanying their little party from the Four Acre; a circumstance which excited some comment among the village folk, at least as quick as their betters to notice the influence of the tender emotions.

'Master Charles has an eye for beauty, ain't he?' observed Mr. Wurzel, nodding towards the unconscious Clara, and jingling the shillings that were still to be found in his ample pockets.

'Ah! Chip of the old block so far, at all events,' murmured Farmer Austin, with a snigger, for he had not yet recovered from

his *fiasco*, which, as is usual in such cases, made him angry with everybody but himself. 'Lawks, to think how different things might have been, if Mr. Richard as was had had his own way!'

'Well, well; let bygones be bygones,' returned the other good-naturedly. 'Besides, the two cases are not on all-fours, whichever way you look at 'em. For my part, I never saw a young couple as seemed better fitted for one another.'

'Just like you, John Wurzel,' said Ralph Ward disdainfully; 'never looking above twenty-four hours ahead of you. Why, what do you suppose Parson's daughter and Squire's younger son would have to live upon between 'em; why, about as little as you've got left for yourself, I reckon.'

Some objection upon the score of its personality might have been urged in other circles to this retort, but it moved not the honest yeoman one whit.

'Keep your heart up, neighbour Ward,' he answered; 'neither Master Charles nor Miss Clara are likely to come upon the parish in your time. It's the thought of *that*, I know, that's troubling you.'

At which reference to the poor-law guardian's well-known apprehension of such catastrophes, the audience laughed unreservedly.

The superiority of Clara to her sister in the matter of comeliness was admitted on all hands. Lucy was far and away the favourite in Mirbridge, yet, as Mr. Wurzel himself had once put it, one might worship by preference at Mr. Smug's conventicle, and yet acknowledge that the parish church was a handsomer erection to look at. It would have surprised the village commentators not a little had they known that Miss Clara was no more thinking of Master Charles at that moment than of King Solomon. Her thoughts were engaged upon his lady mother, a woman she rightly divined whose character was not to be read at first sight, or summed up in a sentence. Sir Richard, too, was an enigma to her, as, indeed, he might well be to many who knew far more of the world than she did; but she felt much less interest in the solution of him. His wife seemed to her to have the stronger will; at all events, it is the hen and not the male bird who looks after the chickens, and it was the chickens, or rather one of them, that Miss Clara had in her eye.

A woman's love, unlike that of the coarser sex, is essentially a personal matter, and fixes itself upon one particular object; but a woman's ambition differs but little from that of a man. Clara Thorne's case was common enough—that of a girl who wishes to do the best for herself, and feels there is no time to lose—but her character was an exceptional one. Like many more of her sex than is suspected, her nature was well-nigh passionless; but, what is more rare, she had from the first dawn of womanhood formed a plan of life for herself which comprehended not, indeed, a wide area, but many possibilities. In one

way she had but little sympathy with the lover in the ballad who announces his intention, in case he 'can't find a black eye to his mind,' to straightway take up with a blue one; for she really did not much care, providing he should be suitable in more important respects, whether her swain had a black eye or not; but on the other hand, she was to the full as philosophic. If she could not have a peer she would be well content with a commoner who would one day be a baronet; in default of him she would have taken a commoner with no such expectations, but sufficiently well-to-do, and so on, and so on, though she would have 'stopped somewhere,' and in all probability—despite her late hint to the contrary—short of a gentleman farmer, however wealthy, who had so much less of the gentleman than of the farmer about him, as Mr. Jacob Austin. Her opportunities she knew would be few, and she had made up her mind to take advantage of them; and, above all, never to drop the substance (that is, the man of substance) for the shadow, in the shape of youth, good looks and other virtues in connection with an inadequate income. In spite of all this it would have been a libel to call Clara Thorne mercenary, and a still greater one to term her mean. Indeed, she was liberal, with what little she had, even to lavishness. Nature herself, as she was wont (perhaps in unconscious self-excuse) to say, had intended her for a good social position, and she was not going to fly in her face.

Nor, because she was wanting in that tender feeling towards the other sex which we are wont to associate with a maiden's heart, must we suppose Clara Thorne to be deficient in good feeling. She was far, indeed, from being sentimental; but she had an affectionate esteem for her father and mother, and would have sacrificed more for them than many girls who are more demonstrative in their attachment to their parents. Lucy she really loved. It would have given her infinite pain to have found in her a rival; though, had Charles Trevor turned out to be the man she at first had taken him for, she would certainly not have given him up to Lucy. This would not, however, have been so cruel as it would have been in another; for she was incredulous of the strength of an emotion (to which she was herself a stranger) excited on so short an acquaintance, and would have looked on Lucy's weakness for the young man as the father of commercial life, as portrayed upon the stage, regards the first falling in love of his young Hopeful. As matters had turned out, she had no objection to the young gentleman's attentions to her sister. It would not be a good match; but then Lucy was differently constituted from herself, and would find in the devotion of a husband a recompense for his want of worldly goods; and at all events Charles Trevor would be better than the village doctor.

The two girls walked homewards together in silence, the elder occupied with her own thoughts, the younger catching with eagerness the crumbs of conversation between her parents and Mr. Charles, who were a few steps ahead of her. With all his naturalness he was not so simple as to neglect the old birds for the young one, however much he might have preferred her tender twitter to their maturer notes. It could not quite be said that he knew on which side his bread was buttered, for in his own case he was only too careless of consequences; but he knew how to spread it for other people. Moreover, he liked both the Rector and his wife, and the favourable impression they had made on him was reciprocal. As they reached the Rectory gates, Mr. Thorne, indeed, was on the point of inviting him to come in, had not a nudge from his lady's elbow foiled the hospitable intent. She was burning to discuss the events of the afternoon, as well as their companion himself, with 'the dear girls.'

So at the gate Mr. Charles was compelled to take his leave, which he did with much open cordiality, save towards one of the family; who, however, received at least its equivalent in the shape of a lingering pressure of the hand.

CHAPTER XII.

CRITICISMS.

EVEN if the gift besought by the poet of 'seeing ourselves as others see us' could be granted, it would not go far towards portraying our real characters; for, as in the case of a landscape, their view of us depends mainly on their standpoint. In the family discussion upon the Trevors which of course at once took place at the Rectory, there was, for example, only one point of unanimous agreement among them, namely, that her ladyship ruled the roast. Even this was expressed with a difference.

'She strikes me as a person of great force of character,' said the Rector admiringly.

'Yes, a very masterful woman,' assented Mrs. Thorne.

'No doubt,' put in Clara even still more drily. 'I should not like to scratch her.'

'Good Heavens!' ejaculated the Rector, 'why should you?'

'Clara is only thinking of the proverb, my dear,' explained her mother, 'about the Russian and the Tartar.'

'Oh, how wicked!' replied Lucy indignantly. 'It is my belief, mamma, she will turn out a real Lady Bountiful, and be of immense use to you in the parish.'

Clara looked volumes of majestic pity at this outburst of enthusiasm.

'What I admire her for,' said the Rector, 'is the pleasant way she has with everybody.'

'Not with *everybody*, dear papa, surely,' said Clara, like a schoolmistress who sets right a favourite pupil; 'she was very nice to *you*, no doubt.'

'Well, really: now what do *you* say, Amy?' inquired the Rector with a little flush.

'I am not jealous, my dear Percy, if you mean that,' said Mrs. Thorne, laughing; 'though there is no question that her ladyship made herself very agreeable to you; but I do think she has not only a will of her own, but a temper. The way she snapped up poor Mr. Charles once or twice was, I thought, very hard upon him.'

'Well, I really never noticed it,' answered the Rector. 'Did you, Lucy?' he added, turning confidently to that staunch oft-tried ally for succour.

'I did not think she was very kind to him, I must say,' murmured Lucy. 'It is plain he is not her favourite son.'

'It is very sad when parents make a difference in their love to their children,' observed the Rector with great gravity, and looking out of window as if for the consolation of Universal Nature.

'Sometimes it is ready made for them,' remarked Clara drily, 'in which case how can they help it?'

'They ought to help it,' said her mother resolutely.

Clara laughed good-humouredly. It was her custom to look things in the face; and though fully conscious of the secondary position she held in the heart of at least one of her parents, her nature (though as much perhaps from its defects as its merits) was incapable of jealousy.

'In some cases,' observed Mrs. Thorne gently, 'it may be impossible to love two sons alike. Where one, for example, has misbehaved himself, and the other has been always dutiful. But I cannot think, from what I have seen of the young man, that Mr. Charles has committed any very serious fault.'

She looked round for adhesion to this remark; Lucy's eyes were cast upon the ground, and she answered nothing.

'He seems indeed a frank young fellow enough,' said the Rector.

'Still, is it not possible,' observed Clara gravely, 'that notwithstanding Charles' many virtues, his elder brother may be still nearer perfection, and thereby have earned the preference of a discerning mother?'

'It may be so, of course,' said Mrs. Thorne, smiling. It would have been futile indeed, as she well knew, to enter into the lists with Clara when in the contemptuous vein; one has heard of 'chilled shot,' and there is also such a thing—in the case of certain natures which seldom stoop to argument—as chilled armour plating.

'Well, of course one has no right to say so,' remarked Lucy impulsively, 'but I have a suspicion that Mr. Hugh Trevor is not so very nice.'

'You have certainly no right to say so, my dear Lucy,' said her mother reprovingly; 'may I ask what induces you to *think* so?'

'I really can't say,' said Lucy confusedly. 'It's only a foolish presentiment, and I don't pretend to defend it.'

'This is quite a new edition of Dr. Fell,' observed the Rector, laughing. 'That unfortunate person was at all events visible to his detractors; but poor Mr. Hugh, it seems, is condemned not only unheard, but unseen.'

'I have said it was very foolish of me, dear papa,' murmured Lucy.

'Well, well, as long as you don't shape your conduct upon such a preconceived conviction, there is no harm done, my dear. Sir Richard, I am afraid, is by no means in good health. Everything he said and did seemed to cost him an effort.'

'The poor man was bored to distraction,' observed Clara.

'Then I don't think he ought to have been,' said Mrs. Thorne decisively. 'Everything was being done to do him honour and give him pleasure; and, if he was bored by it, it was not only ungracious but ungrateful.'

'Still, think of Farmer Austin, and a school-feast, *and* Lady Joddrell, all in one day!' sighed Clara sympathetically. 'If he had anything wrong in his system—gout, for instance—it *must* have brought it out.'

'I didn't like the look of his eyes,' remarked the Rector, who rather prided himself, and not without reason—for he had a large practice as a gratuitous adviser—upon his medical knowledge.

'That is better than taking objection to his nose,' observed Clara grimly.

'My *dear* child,' exclaimed Mrs. Thorne, 'how *can* you?'

It was, indeed, an observation not only reprehensible of itself, but exceedingly out of keeping with the character of the speaker. As usual, however, Clara had her reasons for making it. She wished to distract attention from Lucy, whom she herself, as she was well aware, had led into an indiscretion of speech of which she was bitterly repenting.

'Oh, as to *that*,' said the Rector, 'I am quite sure Sir Richard has nothing to reproach himself with. He is not that sort of man at all. Moreover, I noticed that he only put his lips to the glass when he drank our healths.'

'Perhaps he knew the sherry came from the Sun,' suggested Clara. 'Seriously, however, I agree with you, papa, that it is he, and not Lady Trevor, that is the invalid.'

'I wonder why he should have tried to persuade us to the contrary?' murmured Mrs. Thorne.

'Perhaps there was some passing ailment of her ladyship; if so, it has suddenly disappeared. I never saw a woman adapt herself with better grace to circumstances that must have been so very literally foreign to her,' remarked the Rector.

'There seemed to be more grace than ease about her,' observed Clara.

'How so?' demanded her father. 'Dear me, how difficult it is for a person of your own sex, provided only she is striking and attractive, to please you women.'

'On the other hand, dear papa,' rejoined the elder daughter demurely, 'how easily she pleases *your* sex. I do not deny that Lady Trevor has great gifts; but I am not quite so sure that she possesses the attribute which you are accustomed to place above all others of a social kind—that of naturalness.'

'That is because, in her particular case, naturalness itself must seem to us to have a certain artificiality about it. That fact especially struck me when Lady Trevor was speaking to Miss Yorke. Anything more pleasant than her manner I never saw in any one, while her interest in the schoolmistress and her pupils was, I am sure, perfectly genuine, and yet the contrast between the two women was so marked as almost to exclude the idea of sympathy between them.'

'She is certainly a thorough Frenchwoman,' observed Mrs. Thorne, in a tone of conciliation intended for all parties.

'Of that,' said Clara drily, and to the considerable confusion of the last speaker, 'I am no judge; but as regards naturalness I confess Lady Trevor gave me no impression of that kind, although what she said may have cost her less effort than in Sir Richard's case.'

'She was in a very trying situation,' put in the Rector apologetically.

'No doubt,' admitted Clara frankly; 'moreover, Mr. Austin's mistake would have ruffled almost any man's temper. It made a failure of what would otherwise have been a considerable success.'

'I am glad Mr. Smug had the good sense to absent himself,' observed the Rector naïvely; he was thinking of a possible break in the harmony of the day which would have more nearly concerned himself.

'It is not unlikely,' said Clara, 'that his natural delicacy of mind was assisted by a hint from the Agent to stay at home!'

'I hope he did not hurt the old man's feelings,' returned the Rector gravely; 'Mr. Morris is not very diplomatic.'

'Diplomatic! he is the rudest man I know,' remarked Clara.

'He has never been rude to *you*, my dear, I do hope,' said the Rector, with a humorous pretence of apprehension.

'No. It was a mistake of mine to call him undiplomatic, because he never bullies, save where he can do so with safety. He is tempestuous only with the reeds. With us he is one of those hearty, plain-spoken fellows who are a little rough in their manner, but thoroughly honest; but many people, whose opinion is of no consequence, think him a bit of a rogue.'

'Hush, hush, my dear; we must not say such things of our neighbours, even in jest. It is not wise, and, what is of more consequence, it is not right.'

'I wonder what Lady Trevor thought of Lady Joddrell, Clara?' said Mrs. Thorne, by way of flinging a spoonful of oil upon the waves that were gathering upon her elder daughter's brow.

'After what papa has said I am afraid to answer that question,' was the dry reply, 'though I think I could. It would be much more interesting, however, to know what Lady Joddrell thought of Lady Trevor. Much as some queen, whose (limited) monarchy is threatened, regards, I fancy, a pretender to the throne. What is of even more consequence to Lady Trevor, however, is what Mrs. Westrop thinks of her. It would have been an act of charity to whisper in her ear as she went out to meet her, "Conciliate that woman." I would rather have her on my side than half the county.'

'Well, I confess if I were Lady Trevor I would not make a friend of Mrs. Westrop,' said Lucy.

'Perhaps not; but if you were Lady Trevor, and the clever woman I take her to be, you would not make an enemy of her. She has a very sharp tongue.'

The Rector, who was flattening his nose against the window, here gave a little cough.

'I assure you it is a great deal sharper than mine, papa,' continued Clara quietly; 'and, besides, I only address my remarks to the family circle.'

The Rector had it on his lips to say that though this was a great advantage, it was confined to those outside of it, but, taught by long experience, he held his peace.

'How magnificently she was dressed, was she not?' exclaimed Mrs. Thorne with sudden enthusiasm. 'Even you, Percy, must have noticed that.'

'Mrs. Westrop! Well, really! I didn't look at her.'

'No, *no;* Lady Trevor, of course,' returned his wife, a little impatient at this melancholy ineptitude in one of whose intelligence she had so high an opinion. 'I should not be at all surprised if it was Worth.'

'Worth what?' inquired the good man, not perceiving that she had finished her sentence. The three ladies burst out laughing; there is nothing that tickles the fancy of women so much

as ignorance of attire in the male ; it is like the utterance of a false quantity among scholars.

'You dear, good papa,' cried Lucy, embracing him, 'what *is* the use of your having taken a first-class at Cambridge ? Mamma is speaking of a lady's tailor. In England Worth makes the Man, but in Paris he makes the Woman.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROMISE.

It was not, perhaps, to Lady Trevor's disadvantage, as regarded the keeping secret her own affairs, that she had shown some signs of temper at the error into which Farmer Austin had fallen in taking her younger offspring for son and heir. It was upon the whole in accordance with the general view of what was fitting in a lady of birth and rank that, being annoyed (as she well might be), she should show her annoyance ; a circumstance which was the less to be regretted, since, from the glances she cast at Mr. Morris, it was evident that she held him responsible for the *fiasco*. The Agent was very far from being a popular man, and to have seen him snubbed in public would have been more welceme to many of that festive throng than 'bread and circuses.' Lady Trevor, however, had no such Machiavellian intention in her life ; though unable to restrain it, she imagined, on the contrary, its expression to be harmful to the part she had to play, which embittered her still more against the delinquent. As in duty bound, he accompanied herself and Sir Richard when they retired from the tent, and she hardly waited till they were out of earshot of the crowd to speak her mind.

'It seems to me very strange, Mr. Morris, that you should not have taken the trouble to inform, at all events, the chief members of our little community, that my son Hugh was not at present of our party.'

'My dear madam,' returned the Agent in a tone which, though respectful, was anything but servile, 'I had really not the time to do it. Mr. Hugh, as you yourself gave me to understand, and not Mr. Charles, was to have accompanied you to-day, and I could not tell that the young gentleman had changed his mind at the last moment.'

'It was not convenient to him to come,' returned her ladyship haughtily. 'I suppose my son was under no obligation, legal or otherwise, to be at Mirbridge by a certain date.'

'Not at all, madam ; and I regret the mistake, which, however, I must needs say was none of my making.'

'Upon my word, I think Mr. Morris in the right, my dear,' interposed Sir Richard. 'Hugh promised to come with us, and then threw us over for his friend Mr. Gurdon ; if Charles had

not altered his own plans to suit ours, we should have had to come alone.'

Mr. Morris smiled, and opened his ample chest six inches wider by throwing out his arms, as though he should say, 'There you have it, you see, in a nutshell.'

'There were two hours to spare, during which a message could easily have been despatched to the Four Acre,' observed Lady Trevor coldly.

'I really did not feel that the matter was of such importance,' said the Agent apologetically.

'Then you ought to have felt it, Mr. Morris. Surely it was of some consequence that our neighbours should have known whom they were welcoming.'

'It was clear they were pleased with Charlie, at all events,' observed Sir Richard.

If this remark was intended to be conciliatory, it failed in its effect.

'That is not the point at all, Richard,' answered her ladyship with emphasis. 'Their relations with him, whatever they may be, are of small consequence in comparison with his elder brother, who at some future, though I hope long-distant, time, will stand in the same position to them as yourself. The hand-and-glove fashion with which Charles is accustomed to treat everybody is not what would be befitting in his brother's case, and may even already have aroused an unreasonable expectation.'

'Oh, they'll find out the difference between him and Charlie quick enough, you may depend upon that, my dear,' said the Baronet drily.

Lady Trevor bit her lip, but made no reply. The three walked on together in silence through the shrubbery and up to the Court, when the Agent said:

'Will it be convenient to you, Sir Richard, to give your attention to a few matters of business to-day, or shall we say some other time?'

'Oh, another time!' was the precipitate reply; 'I have had quite enough of work already.'

'Still, I think you had better name a day, Richard,' remarked his wife. 'You can hardly expect Mr. Morris to come to the Court on the chance of your being disposed to go into his affairs; or perhaps it would save time and trouble, before discussing them, if he was to send you such accounts as may be necessary.'

'To be sure, a capital plan,' cried Sir Richard, to whom business matters were always hateful. 'Just send them, Morris.'

'But some of them will require explanation, Sir Richard,' remonstrated the Agent.

'They certainly will, if I am to understand them,' laughed

the Baronet; 'my wife here, however, is a capital woman of business, are you not, Nannie?'

'I don't pretend to be any such thing, Richard,' she answered quietly; 'but I don't mind trouble.'

'And I do, Morris, and that's the long and the short of it,' said the Baronet. 'So send what you have to send, and after I have taken counsel's opinion'—here he nodded toward his wife—'we will send for *you*.'

'As you please, sir,' answered the Agent; 'of course you are master here—so far as I am concerned, at least. Good-morning, madam.'

'That was a parting shot he took at you, by jingo!' said Sir Richard, looking after his legal adviser as he made his way to the stables, 'and, indeed, at me as well. I am afraid you have not made a favourable impression on Morris, Nannie.'

'He has not made a favourable impression on *me*,' she answered, 'but very much the reverse. He is a very impertinent fellow.'

'You remember him, then?'

'I do not think I ever saw him before.'

'So much the better, since he cannot remember *you*. I am afraid, however, you have made an enemy of him.'

'If so, I am sorry for it. I cannot regret, however, what I said to him.'

'I suppose not,' said Sir Richard drily. 'The poor man did not know on what a tender spot he touched.'

'I really don't understand you, Richard.'

'Come, come, that is affectation. The fact is, none of this unpleasantness would have come about but for your son Hugh.'

'And is he not your son also?'

'Of course he is; but he is not my idol. I see what is amiss in him, which you never can do. Why the deuce could he not come down here, as it was his duty to do, with his father and mother? He thinks of nothing but himself and his pleasures. What is Mr. Gurdon to him, or he to Mr. Gurdon, that he should wait till that gentleman was at leisure to accompany him?'

'I will write and say that he had better not bring Mr. Gurdon.'

'That is so like you,' answered the Baronet angrily. 'You lose not only your temper when one word is said against the boy, but even your natural intelligence. What does it matter whether his friend comes here or not, now that the mischief is done? I don't mean to say that there *has* been mischief, mind,' he added in more quiet tones; 'but, from your manner, there would seem to have been a great deal. Mr. Morris will naturally ask himself, "What is all this fuss about just because one young man has been mistaken for another? There must be a screw loose somewhere," he will say.'

'Oh, Richard, what have I done?' cried Lady Trevor, turning deadly pale.

'Nothing, nothing, my dear,' he answered kindly, taking her arm and passing it within his own. 'Let us take a turn on the terrace before going indoors. You are not fit to face the servants. I again repeat that, in my opinion, no harm has been done; but you have shown great imprudence. A rope is only as strong as its weakest point; and what is the use of your setting a guard on yourself everywhere save just where danger threatens?'

'Forgive me, Richard, dear; it shall not happen again.'

'I have nothing to forgive you, Nannie, quite the contrary; though that is all past and gone, except the consequences.'

She trembled so excessively that he led her to a seat close by, and sat down by her side. It was under one of the windows of the library, which had access farther on, by a flight of steps, to the terrace, and on these they both mechanically fixed their eyes.

How often, in old times, had she tripped down them with light tread to meet him in the sequestered bowling-green below! How often had he watched there for her coming! What thrills had passed through him as the sound of the opening window, of the flutter of her dress, of her footfall on the gravel, fell on his listening ear! What memories of bliss and fear haunted them both! Beneath them lay the garden and the moat, and beyond the far-stretching park, with its wooded knolls, around which the deer were feeding. No eye could look upon such a spectacle without the thought, 'This is, in truth, a goodly heritage;' and it occurred to Sir Richard now, but without the natural accompaniment, 'and it is all my own.' What was even more strange, the reflection that he would soon have to leave it (of which he was well persuaded) was also absent. At the moment, to do him justice, he was not thinking of himself at all.

'How charmingly the bells sound, Richard!' said Lady Trevor softly. At the conclusion of the festivities in the Four Acre, they had once more been set a-going, and combined with the quiet beauty of the landscape as harmoniously 'as the voice with the instrument.'

'They are the marriage bells, Nannie,' was the grave reply; 'but this is the first time they have rung for us.'

'Great Heaven, do I not know it?' was the passionate rejoinder, all the more deep and significant that it was spoken beneath her breath.

'I did not mention it to grieve you, Nannie,' was his tender reply, 'nor to blame myself. It is not one of those misfortunes that disappear by dwelling upon them. Still, I wish to say a few words about it for the last time.'

'You told me,' she whispered, catching her breath with pain,

and looking unutterably distressed, 'that the last time was to be the last.'

'I did. It is not the first time that I have broken my word to you.'

'Oh, Richard,' she answered, 'why speak of it? Have I not forgiven you long ago?'

'Yes; I wish I could forgive myself as easily—but let that pass. What has happened to-day is only a specimen of what may take place any day or every day. Does it never strike you that we are treading the flowery path which leads to the eternal bonfire?'

The expression on the speaker's face was most curious—all its natural indifference was gone; he looked not only earnest, but apprehensive. The likeness to his father's face, as portrayed after his so-called conversion, was very striking; it revealed that strain of religious feeling that was always mixed with the wild blood of the Trevors.

'I am not afraid,' said his companion scornfully—almost defiantly.

'Not for yourself, I am well aware,' he answered. His tone had a touch of bitterness, which, however, escaped her.

'No, nor for others,' she replied with vehemence. 'What we do is for the sake of the innocent, not for ourselves. It is the only reparation we can make for the wrong that has been done him; we do him right to whom the Law would do a wrong. *He* does no wrong, nor dreams of doing one.'

'I see: when you say "others," you mean Hugh only.'

The speaker's brow was dark, he withdrew the hand that, up to that moment, had been clasped in that of his companion.

She seized it again, and clung to it passionately, though it lay in her grasp without response.

'Oh, Richard, do not forsake me! I have never reproached you; the reparation that you have so often promised is not to me.'

'Again you are thinking of Hugh,' was the stern reply.

'No, *no*,' she answered with distressful haste, 'or, if I was, it was only in connection with yourself. If there is blame in what we do—and I say there is no blame—upon me, great Heaven,' and she looked up to the blue sky appealingly, 'upon *me*, and me alone, be the punishment!'

'Unhappily even you, madam, cannot dictate to Providence. I am answerable for my own share in the matter.'

'You speak of it as if it were a crime,' she replied reproachfully.

'And is it not a crime to deprive one's own flesh and blood of what is his due? I am nearer death than you are, Nannie, and see clearer into these things.'

'On the contrary, Richard, your ill-health—which I deplore above all things, but which I both hope and believe you exaggerate—causes you to take a morbid view of things. Is it a

crime to repair our own wrong to another in the only way that is left open to us? a crime to redress an unjust law? I am content to rest my cause upon that ground alone, before the tribunal of high Heaven.'

'And Charles?'

'Charles is conscious of no wrong, and therefore suffers none. You say he has a noble nature; and I acknowledge it. Would he thank you, then, for the inheritance of these acres at the cost of the revelation of his mother's shame?'

'That is true enough,' muttered Sir Richard; 'the alternative however, ought to be offered him.'

'Why, there *is* no alternative, for if once revealed the shame would cling to him whether he accepted the sacrifice or not.'

'Your logic is good, but it only makes Charles's case the harder. Is he to be a pauper, while Hugh takes all—and what is by rights belonging to Charles?'

'The "by rights" is all the other way, Richard; and why should Charles be left a pauper? he will not be rich, of course——'

'At least, Nannie, let us not deceive ourselves,' put in the Baronet sternly; 'you know that I have saved no money, and at whose door it lies that I have been unable to do so. Not content with robbing Charles of his birthright'—here Lady Trevor's face became scarlet—'well, it is not fair to say that, I own, since he is unaware of his own wrong-doing—but in addition to depriving him of what is due to him by law, Hugh has by his extravagance actually dissipated the small means which would otherwise have been Charles's portion; he knows *that* at all events, since he is aware that I cannot raise money upon the estate. He is cognizant, too, of my state of health, and that there is no time for retrenchment on my part; in fact, his behaviour is as selfish and cruel——'

'Hush, hush!' interrupted Lady Trevor pleadingly; 'you are looking at it from your own standpoint, as though he knew *all*. I will speak to Hugh; I will entreat him to be more moderate in his expenses, I will even urge upon him the propriety of making provision for poor Charles.'

'The "propriety"! *That* will not move him much,' returned Sir Richard scornfully; 'if, indeed, you could show him the *necessity*. However, it is no use talking about it. Let us go in.'

'Not yet,' answered Lady Trevor, in a voice so hoarse and harsh that it was difficult to recognise it as her own. 'Look me in the face, Richard, before you go, and swear to me that you have no design in your mind that you dare not speak of. You *have*, you *have!*'

'What can you possibly mean, Nannie?' he answered, in a tone of astonishment that was, however, but ill-sustained. 'What design can *I* have?'

'I will tell you. This woman, you are saying to yourself, is altogether blinded and deceived in her elder son. She not only credits him with virtues he does not possess, but with a devoted affection for herself of which he is utterly incapable. If I were to tell him the whole truth of the matter, with the threat of its being disclosed to others, in case he does not act generously in the future towards his brother, it will not break his heart. Upon your honour, were you not thinking of some such scheme, Richard ?'

He did not answer, but with downcast eyes and frowning brow picked to pieces the flower in his button-hole.

'Do not trouble yourself to deny it,' she exclaimed. 'I am not so credulous as you once knew me to be. Not so credulous, perhaps, as you think I am, even in the case of my poor boy. It is possible that the information you design to give him will not, as you say, break his heart; but,' she added in broken and distressful tones, 'it will break *mine*. To feel that my Hugh knew —no, I could not survive it. Ah, Richard, Richard !' she cried with emphatic entreaty, 'if one spark of that love for me remains in you which was once your poor excuse—and, alas! mine also—for the sin which is now visited upon our offspring, I pray you spare me this second shame. Promise me, promise me that you will not tell Hugh !'

Sir Richard was greatly moved. He was deeply attached to his wife, and the plea on which she had just laid such stress was one the strength of which he could never ignore. On the other hand, he was angry that his scheme had been detected, exposed, and defeated.

'There, *there*,' he cried with a sort of petulant tenderness, 'I will not tell him; that I swear to you ! You have got your way, as you always do. But remember, you have no longer the right to reproach me; whatever may have been at one time your self-sacrifice, the obligation is henceforth upon the other side; since for your sake I peril my soul.'

She might, not without reason, have urged that she, too, was risking that also ; but she felt too grateful for his surrender to dispute the matter : moreover, she had a shrewd suspicion as to what was at the bottom of Sir Richard's thoughts. When we do amiss in our youth it is only with the fear of the consequences in this world before our eyes ; and even now it seemed to Sir Richard that his wife being well and strong, and only in middle life, had not the same cause for fear of the future that was agitating his own mind. Death, of course, is to all a terrible certainty, but its aspect to those who stand near it is very different from that which it presents to the onlooker from afar

CHAPTER XIV.

SETTLING DOWN.

THE cry with which it was once the wont of a great party 'to go to the country' was 'Retrenchment and Reform,' two rather difficult things to carry politically, but socially almost impossible. There is nothing more easy for a man in apparently good circumstances than to economise upon an extensive scale; he can dispose of his country house, and exchange his town residence for a smaller one, or for one in a less fashionable locality; he can put down his carriage and horses and discharge his men-servants, but the change must be thorough and complete. It is no use hanging on to the old system, and saving a ten-pound note here and another there, for at the most only a few hundreds a year will be saved, and that at the cost of great discomfort. That it is much more pleasant to live on small means with a margin than on a nominally large income, with 'cutting and contriving' to make both ends meet, is what no one who understands the science of life will dispute. But the latter course seems often forced upon us, and sometimes really is so.

Sir Richard Trevor was in this unhappy position. In the matter of expenses he was tied to the stake—the stake he had in the country—and must needs stand the course. He could not dispose of an acre of land, and, while in the occupation of the Court, could hardly live like a gentleman farmer, even had he wished to do so. It is true he might have openly stated, 'I am saving money for my younger son, who has no portion,' but it was obviously unwise to set people talking upon such a subject; and saving, which comes so easy to some folks, was not in Sir Richard's line. He had made his protest, as we have seen, on behalf of Charles, and, having done his best (as he flattered himself) and failed, there was nothing for it but to trust to his wife's promise to appeal to Hugh's generosity. His conscience, which was very intermittent in its action, was for the present, at all events, appeased. Upon the whole, it was perhaps a relief to him that things were to go on as they were; he was not going to die, as more than one of his ancestors would have expressed it, to-day, nor probably to-morrow, and even when he should die, considerable allowance would surely be made for a person of landed property placed in so peculiar a position. As for retrenchment, was he to leave his twenty-stall stable empty, buy a steady cob for himself, and send his wife abroad (like 'clothes going to the wash,' as someone has called it) in a basket-chaise drawn by a Shetland pony? Such a course of conduct would be incongruous, inappropriate, and, above all, inconvenient. Suppose he adopted it—tried it for a couple of years, and saved

as many thousand pounds, what would be the use of such a sum as a provision for Charley?

So the Court had been once more provided, through Mr. Morris, with the means of locomotion to which it had been accustomed of yore—carriage and horses for its master and mistress, and other horses for the young gentlemen and for a friend or two who might be staying with them, and a pony-carriage of the last new design for her ladyship. The spacious cellars needed no new stocking, but only required a brick wall here and there to be broken down, on the other side of which lay treasures, not increased, indeed, but more valuable than had been originally deposited there. The first invitation to dinner at the Court was looked forward to by heads of families, not athirst with mere curiosity, and to whom a ten-mile drive out and in was generally ill-compensated for by any profusion of hospitality. It was not, however, Sir Richard's place to begin; the calls of ceremony were not yet over; and in most cases—such as at Catesby Hall—it was thought judicious to delay any feast-giving to the new-comers till their party was joined by the elder son. In the meantime, the Trevors settled into their places quietly enough.

Mr. Thorne was delighted with his new parishioners, though the attraction of their presence at church considerably exceeded that of what he considered his best sermon, which he had expressly composed for the occasion. Every eye was fixed upon the lord of the manor's family pew, unfortunately a very high one, so that the humble folks in the gallery had for once an advantage of their betters. The report of her ladyship's behaviour was most satisfactory to all good church-goers. So far from exhibiting the ignorance that might have been expected in a benighted foreigner, she knew exactly where to look for everything—even for the Baptismal Service that was interpolated, as it often was at Mirbridge, in the afternoon. It was noticed that, though she did not sing, she paid a good deal of attention to the psalmody, and especially to the voices of the children under Miss Yorke's control.

Sir Richard, on the other hand, seemed a little astray. His persevering search for the Collect of the day was not rewarded until the Epistle and Gospel had both been disposed of; and during the sermon his eyes were observed to be fast closed—it was hoped, but hardly believed—in reverential reflection. Those of his son, on the contrary, wandered from the pulpit in the direction of the Rector's pew, and much contention therefore arose as to which of the two young ladies who sat with their mother had attracted his gaze. On the whole, the verdict of the church-going public upon the family was favourable.

Mr. Smug, on his part, had nothing to complain of; he had had no expectation that he would include any of the tenants of

the Court in his little fold, and was, therefore, not disappointed; while he received ample assurance that the same stipend which had been conferred upon him by Sir Marmaduke would be continued by his son. He was obliged to confess that there was a good deal of 'the old man' about Sir Richard (indeed, his views upon matters of faith, as occasionally disclosed, appeared to be of the crudest kind); a good deal of 'the young man' in Master Charles, whose character he pronounced to be peculiar; and very little of 'the new man' in either of them—but Mr. Smug had been prepared for these things.

The Court and the Rectory were in a few days on the best of terms—that is to say, on very easy ones. Mr. Thorne and Sir Richard had had several walks together, which had convinced them both that, though they had not a single idea in common, they had no antagonism to one another.

Mrs. Thorne had accompanied Lady Trevor in her drives about the parish, recommending the more worthy of her poorer neighbours to her favour, and touching as lightly as possible upon the short-comings of those of whom she disapproved. Her ladyship showed a kindly interest in everyone, and asked so many questions about them that her companion protested that before a month was out, she would not only know her way about the parish as well as herself, but would be on the same footing with the people themselves. It was difficult to balk her curiosity even when, as on one occasion, Mrs. Thorne would gladly have done so if she could.

They were driving alone, as usual, by an outlying portion of the parish called the Spinnies, from the number of little copses it contained, when they met a young girl neatly dressed, with a basket of eggs in her hand, on her way to the village. She was so pretty and bright-looking, that she might have sat for a picture of Red Riding-hood, save for her age, which was nearly twenty.

'What a lovely girl!' exclaimed Lady Trevor, as they drew nearer.

'Yes; and she is as good as she is pretty,' was the enthusiastic reply. Then suddenly Mrs. Thorne stopped herself, and pointing to a by-road in the wood upon her right, hastily observed, 'I think you will find this our shortest way, Lady Trevor.'

'But I must see this charming creature,' answered her ladyship, reining in her pony. 'I did not notice her in church last Sunday. Who is she?'

'She lives a long way off, and Sunday, you remember, was wet,' was the evasive rejoinder. Then, as the girl came up, 'How are you, Jenny?'

The colour came into Jenny's face at being thus taken notice of before 'the great lady,' making her look more lovely than before. She dropped a curtsey that for simple grace would have

put the Queen's drawing-room to shame, and answered, 'Nicely, thank you, ma'am.'

'If those eggs are not bespoke, I should like to buy them,' said Lady Trevor kindly.

'They are yours already, my lady,' was the smiling reply; 'I am taking them to Mrs. Grange at the Court.' Here the speaker blushed again, but much more deeply, as though she had stolen the commodities in question. Her confusion did not escape Lady Trevor, but its significance was assisted by a gentle nudge from her companion's elbow.

'Then I shall see you again, my lass, for I shall be home as soon as you are,' said her ladyship, smiling, and driving on.

'What is the mystery about her?' she inquired, as the carriage turned into the wood. 'Nothing to her discredit, I am sure, or I will never believe in faces again.'

'No discredit at all; but she is very shy, and the fact is that she is engaged to be married to your housekeeper's only son, which made her a little alarmed at you. The matter was difficult to explain, for the young man had apparently deserted her, and was supposed to have enlisted, whereas his absence has now been satisfactorily accounted for, and he is coming home, having obtained a situation which will permit of his early marriage. Her uncle does not bear a good character, I am sorry to say, and it will be a great relief to me to see her happily settled and in good hands.'

'Well, I hope Sir Richard will be able to do something for the young couple. But you have not told me the girl's name.'

'Did I not? Well, it does not much signify, as she is so soon to change it, and, moreover, everyone knows her as Jenny; but her name is Beeton.'

This, then, was Lady Trevor's niece, of whose existence she had just heard for the first time—the child of her dissolute brother, the future daughter-in-law of her own housekeeper! What new complications, what new dangers might not flow from this unexpected source! Luckily, Mrs. Thorne, who had her own reasons for not pursuing the subject, studiously kept her eyes away from her companion, lest she should read something of apprehension in them. She could not help speaking of the Beetons—the name had been wrung from her—and it was possible enough that Lady Trevor had never heard of them, but still she might have done so. Fortunately her ladyship took a much longer round than usual, so that she was not at home, as she had promised herself to be, before Jenny had left the Court. It need scarcely be said that the subject was not again referred to by either of the two ladies.

The growing intimacy between the old folks, or of those who by comparison might be called so, at the Court and Rectory was

even exceeded by that between the young ones. Charlie made himself quite at home at the Thornes', and on more than one occasion the two girls had come to the great house at his invitation, and played tennis in the moat-garden with him and Dr. Wood. They made a very handsome 'Foursome,' as it would have been called farther north.

Dr. Wood was a tall, thin, delicate fellow, with a thoughtful face; he looked like a musician and a genius, though, as a matter of fact, he was neither the one nor the other. But his eyes were keen as well as fine, and his long reach gave him a great advantage with the racket. This was fortunate, otherwise the match would not have been a fair one, as Lucy, who was always Charlie's partner, was a player very superior to her sister. 'The Duchess' would have become any court but the tennis-court, which demands movements not always consistent with dignity.

Sir Richard and his wife would sometimes walk together in the afternoon on the terrace, from which a view of the game could be obtained.

'What a pretty creature one would think Miss Lucy to be,' he said, 'if it were not that she had a sister.'

'Do you think so?' was the indifferent rejoinder.

'What! You are surely not going to tell me that Clara yonder is only a man's beauty,' said Sir Richard contemptuously; 'that would be a woman's reply, indeed. I should have thought you had more sense.'

'I was only referring to the former portion of your remark,' answered Lady Trevor quietly, 'that which referred to Lucy. As to Clara Thorne, I think she is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.'

'Come, that's honest. As a reward for such nobility of spirit, I will qualify my admiration, and say, the most beautiful girl I have seen these twenty years.'

She smiled faintly, and pressed his arm.

'I suppose the young doctor will marry her, eh? He is a deuced handsome fellow, to whom any girl is likely to say "Yes."'

'I am afraid not,' was her mechanical reply.

'Afraid! Why should you be afraid?' he answered gravely. 'What does it matter whether she says "No" or "Yes"?'

'I am only pitying poor Mr. Wood. That girl will never marry a country doctor, Richard; she will fly at higher game.'

'You alarm me in my turn; surely not at Charles, my dear? That would never do.'

'You need be under no apprehension of any such catastrophe,' was the quiet rejoinder.

'I am glad to hear you say so, for you have a quicker eye than mine in such matters. Only I noticed this morning that Master Charles was riding the new mare with a side-saddle, and

had a habit on, which I thought looked suspicious. Young men don't take such trouble for nothing, you know ; and he was not breaking in the horse for *you*, I suppose.'

'Charles is very good-natured, and I dare say one of the Rectory girls has expressed a wish for a ride ; as for Clara, I have watched them narrowly, and am convinced that Charles's regard for her is quite platonic.'

'I don't much believe in the platonic affection of young men,' observed Sir Richard, and there he stopped. It was an observation, he felt, that might have taken its place in the catalogue of things one would rather not have said.

'Hugh writes me this morning that he is coming down to-morrow with his friend Mr. Gurdon,' observed Lady Trevor, after a little pause.

'Indeed ; I shall believe it when I see them,' replied Sir Richard drily ; 'he has already promised us the pleasure of his presence three times.'

Lady Trevor blushed to her forehead ; it was on the tip of her tongue to say, 'There is, at all events, one person whom he has not disappointed by his delay,' but she restrained herself.

'Mr. Gurdon had some work to do,' she answered gently, 'which took him longer than he expected, and Hugh has been waiting for it to be finished.'

'Very considerate and unselfish of him, no doubt,' replied Sir Richard drily ; 'I hope he will display the same qualities when he comes down to Mirbridge.'

Even to that she answered nothing ; and when presently Charles called out merrily from below, 'Can we have our tea and cake down here, mother?' she replied, 'Surely, my dear ;' and not only gave the necessary orders, but joined the little party over their repast, and dispensed the viands, while her husband smoked his cigar with complacent calm.

CHAPTER XV.

DR. WOOD HAS HIS ANSWER.

WHEN tea was over, the tennis was not immediately resumed. Charles drew out his pipe, in imitation of his father (at least as far as the tobacco was concerned, for Sir Richard was one of those men who are never seen with a pipe and rarely without a cigar), and bade Mr. Wood, who showed symptoms of shyness, to take heart of grace and do the like. The young doctor, however, who was not without discretion, declined the offer ; he lay leaning on his elbow at Clara's feet, while his young friend occupied a similar position as regarded Lucy. The ladies disposed of themselves, if with less of comfort, with more grace,

and Sir Richard leant against a tree. It was a very picturesque tableau, and so far as conversation was concerned by no means wanting in animation. Charlie rattled on after his manner; Mr. Wood (for his title of Doctor was conferred upon him by a public not conversant with the niceties of professional distinctions) told amusing stories, at the invitation of Lady Trevor, of his professional experiences in Mirbridge, better worth her attention than he dreamt of; and there was a good deal of pleasant laughter among the young people. In the midst of it, the stately butler appeared on the terrace; he stood for a moment hesitating to trust himself to the steep incline of turf that led down to the tennis-court, and it was a long way round by the steps.

'I hope nothing is the matter,' murmured Lady Trevor in a low voice. To be in expectation, without reason, of a blow from some quarter of which she could not guess, had become one of the conditions under which she lived.

'You may be sure of that, or Cadman would look much more pleased,' said Sir Richard cynically.

'Somebody has sent for the doctor, observed Charlie. 'Wood has arranged it so, by way of advertisement, I'll bet a shilling.'

Still the butler hesitated.

'Why the devil don't you speak?' cried Sir Richard impatiently.

It is easy enough for a butler to speak to his master and mistress, but not so easy, if he has a well-regulated mind, to shout at them; and this it was now necessary for Mr. Cadman to do. In a high-pitched tone there seems always something significant of an equality with the person addressed. Thus adjured, however, Mr. Cadman made an inverted hollow of his hands like a ship's trumpet, and bellowed a soft something which was unintelligible to all ears save those of his mistress.

'Hugh is come,' she explained, in a tone that was difficult to define; the fact was that she was pleased upon her own account, but conscious that her son's appearance was *mal à propos.*

'What an annoying thing it is,' observed Sir Richard, 'that your habitual dawdler—the man who never keeps his appointments by any chance—when he does come always comes before his time! No, Nannie,' he added imperiously, as his wife rose from her seat, 'I will not have you break up our little party. Let Hugh come down to *us*, if he wants to see us.'

'Tell Mr. Hugh that we are having tea on the tennis-ground, Cadman,' said Lady Trevor; her clear, keen tones required no mechanical help to make themselves heard.

'Yes, my lady,' returned the butler, hastily withdrawing himself, and as well pleased to get this out-of-door duty over as a sentry relieved. Then there was silence among the little party, and a feeling of expectation mixed with discomfort, such

as prevails in a company which has dined together when a couple of guests are announced who have been asked to come in the evening.

Presently the young men appeared upon the terrace. The one was tall and slim, with a complexion dark to swarthiness, and that air of looking older than his years which so often results from dissipation. His face, already furrowed here and there by the plough of passion, was, however, by no means that of a mere libertine ; it had self-will and even power in it. With indifference, which, considering that his family were awaiting him, seemed studied and intentional, he walked very slowly, and stopped now and again to point out, as it seemed, objects of interest to his companion. This latter gentleman presented a strong contrast to him ; he was short and fair, and wore a little blonde moustache, which his fingers played with nervously. He was much better looking than his young friend and host, and more intellectual in expression, but on the other hand obviously ill at ease, as one doubtful of his welcome.

When they came opposite the tennis-ground they both raised their hats, and Mr. Gurdon made a movement as though he were about to descend the slope, but Hugh caught him by the arm, and compelled him to go farther on and make use of the stone steps. Slight as it was, the action was significant ; it seemed to say, 'Do not let these good folk imagine we are in such haste to join them, or inclined to put ourselves to inconvenience on their account.' As they came down the steps, from which the whole party below could be distinctly seen, Hugh made some observation to his companion, which made him look more uncomfortable and embarrassed than before.

Lady Trevor came forward quickly, and embraced her son, who at once introduced her to his friend, whom she welcomed cordially ; Sir Richard, too, took his hand, with a few words of courteous welcome, and then offered Hugh three fingers. As for the brothers, they merely nodded to one another, the elder surlily, the younger with careless indifference.

Poor Mr. Wood was not introduced at all ; a circumstance, however, which, considering the sort of salutations which were being employed, could hardly have been a matter of regret to him. It almost seemed, but for the presence of two young ladies—who met, of course, with the most polite reception from the new-comers—that there might have been a domestic outbreak. A sense of something of the kind made Lucy exceedingly uncomfortable, but Clara, perfectly at her ease, not only took in the whole situation at a glance, but rather enjoyed it. She had a shrewd suspicion that whatever was likely to come to her in the way of good would not be the garnered autumn sheaf, but the spoils of battle.

'If I had known there was such a magnificent creature as that in Mirbridge,' whispered Hugh to his friend, waving his hand towards the house as if he were calling attention to its architecture, 'by gad, I would have come down here a week ago, like a shot!'

'What a charming house you have, Lady Trevor!' observed Mr. Gurdon, turning upon his heel with an abruptness that marked some displeasure. 'It must have taken centuries to perfect its beauties.'

'I am unfortunately the last person qualified to discourse upon them,' she observed, smiling, 'being almost as much a new-comer as yourself. Miss Thorne here,' indicating Clara with a graceful movement of the hand, 'would make a much better cicerone.'

'I have had the benefit of Mrs. Grange's lectures upon the historical architecture of the Court once or twice,' said Clara; 'but I dare say Mr. Gurdon's educated eye knows more about it than I can tell him. Of course Queen Elizabeth slept here, as in every other country mansion of importance; Oliver Cromwell is answerable for various dilapidations, which have long since enhanced its beauties; and Charles II. was once sheltered—for one can hardly say accommodated—in the Priest's Chamber.'

Mr. Gurdon laughed aloud at this *résumé*, and ere he could reply Hugh put in his word.

'If Miss Thorne would condescend to show us over the Court, Gurdon, you and I would pay her the same fee as if she were the housekeeper, and perhaps a trifle over, would we not?'

'I'm a poor man,' said the artist, with humorous caution, 'and don't know what the fee may be.'

'Moreover I cannot permit Mrs. Grange to be deprived of her rightful vails,' remarked Lady Trevor. Though she spoke in jest, she felt no little annoyance at her son's proposal, which showed clearly enough that Clara's marvellous beauty had already attracted him.

'Oh, I'll make it all right with the housekeeper,' exclaimed Hugh impatiently. 'She shall have a guinea, and welcome.'

Mr. Gurdon saw the look of displeasure in his hostess's face.

'A fee of that kind, my dear fellow,' he said, 'is, in my case, practically prohibitive; I prefer to buy a catalogue, and go over the whole Exhibition myself.'

'Oh, do you? Then you and I will go over it by *ourselves*, will we not, Miss Thorne?'

'Certainly not,' said Clara, with cold distinctness; 'I would not take such a responsibility upon myself for the world. I might mistake Cromwell's Room for that of Charles I., and go utterly astray in your own genealogy in the Picture Gallery.'

'Is there a Picture Gallery?' inquired Mr. Gurdon, pricking up

his professional ears. 'You never told me a word of that, Hugh.'

Sir Richard smiled grimly, and flicked the ash away from his cigar. What the smile meant his wife well understood.

Hugh possessed the virtue of not interfering in his friends' affairs, rather in excess ; that is, he took no sort of interest in their likes or dislikes whatever.

'Then we are not to go over the house at all this afternoon ?' he inquired sullenly of his mother. When he did not have his way, he resented it in her case, notwithstanding her devotion to him, quite as much as in that of another, and she could not bear to see him disappointed.

'I have no objection I am sure, my dear, if Miss Thorne has not ?'

'If you care to make one of the party, Lady Trevor, I shall be very pleased to make another,' murmured Clara.

'Then let us all four go together,' said Hugh, with the air of one who has sacrificed his wishes for those of others. 'Come along.'

'I suppose all lawn-tennis, Wood, is over for to-day,' muttered Charles ; 'just as we were game-and-game, too.'

'I am afraid so,' sighed the young doctor. It was much harder on him, he thought to himself, than it was on Charles, who could play tennis with the Rector's daughters at any time.

'It's all owing to that infernal English system of primogeniture,' continued Charles; 'the eldest son always gets his own way.'

'No doubt,' responded the other gloomily. His sympathy, which was quite genuine, was the more valuable, since Mr. Wood himself happened to be an elder son, without, however, having derived much benefit from the circumstance. 'It is no use being the eldest of six—or even a son and heir—if your father has nothing to leave you.'

As the expedition of four took their way to the house, Sir Richard laid his hand upon the shoulder of his younger son.

'Come along, Charles, and have a cigar,' he said kindly ; 'I want a few words with you.'

This left Mr. Wood and Lucy alone together, by no means to that young lady's satisfaction. She did not believe that Mr. Wood had any serious intentions with regard to her, but ever since Clara had put the idea into her head, she felt a certain embarrassment in his proximity. His little quips and quirks rather amused her : and she respected him as an honest and hard-working young fellow, but she did not at all like the grave expression which his handsome face had suddenly assumed.

'While Sir Richard speaks to his son, perhaps you will be so good as to let me say a very few words to *you*, Miss Lucy,' he murmured softly.

'To me? By all means,' she answered with a little nervous laugh. It struck her that his voice had a professional tone, such as he used when warning his more delicate patients against an imprudence, and this humorous idea sustained her under what she felt were very trying circumstances.

'You have been always very good and kind to me, Miss Lucy, *very*,' he began.

She did not like this exordium at all, and said 'Really!' in a tone of indifference that expressed her dissatisfaction with it.

'Pray forgive me; I dare say you did not know it yourself, because it is your nature to be kind to everyone; but so it has been indeed. On the present occasion, all that I have to ask of you is a little patience.'

She bowed her head assentingly. She could not refuse to hear him, but very much wished that his mode of expression was less tortuous. If he had thrown himself on his knees—for they were now quite alone—and had done with it, it would have been on the whole a relief to her. She could then have given him his answer at once, and he must have got up again and gone away. Still she was not cruel. No woman deserving of the name can help feeling a little tenderness—though it be a pity that is *not* akin to love—towards an honest man who is offering his all to her; and her face showed it.

'Thank you,' he said humbly, 'I was sure you would grant me that much; and now I only ask one thing more, that, however you may disapprove of what I am about to say, you will not be angry with me.'

'You may take that for granted, Mr. Wood, I think; I cannot imagine you saying anything that would give me just cause for anger.'

'That is so like you. "That is Miss Lucy all over," as the poor people say in the village, when they speak of some good you have been doing. I am but a poor man myself, Miss Lucy. Well born, indeed, and I hope not ill bred, but not endowed with any gifts of fortune. I need hardly speak of my possessions, indeed, they are so insignificant; but my income, though small, is an increasing one, and if I may say so without vanity, I am getting to be known in my own profession.'

'I have always heard you spoken of very highly,' said Lucy, filling up an awkward pause.

'Still, praise is not pudding (if I may use so vulgar an expression, Miss Lucy), and I am well aware that it would be the height of imprudence—indeed, a mere impertinence—to mention to anyone except yourself, who are so kind and patient, the ambition that consumes me. From the first moment that your dear mother did me the honour of calling me in to the Rectory—I forget under what circumstances; I think the housemaid

had a whitlow—my thoughts have never strayed from her since.'

'From the housemaid?'

'Good heavens! do not mock me, Miss Lucy—from your adorable sister.'

The relief to Lucy was intense; but she could not utter one word. She felt herself on the very verge of hysterics. For the moment all her pity for the poor man, notwithstanding his passionate, pleading face and earnest tone, was lost in the excessive humour of the situation. No spark of jealousy interfered with it, albeit she at once understood that all the young doctor's marked attentions to her had been paid, as it were by proxy, to her sister. The idea of what Clara would think of it when she came to tell her—if she should ever dare to do it filled her mind with inextinguishable mirth.

'You know what your dear sister is,' continued the young fellow plaintively, 'as beautiful as Venus, but haughty as Minerva; I dared not, for the life of me, approach her, as it were, directly; but I hoped, through your gracious intercession, in time—though it were after long years—to get her to listen to me. But something has happened to-day—I dare say you did not observe it—that made me speak to you on this matter in spite of myself. Weeks ago, when the Court was being put in order for the reception of Sir Richard and his family, I ventured to ask your sister to let me show her over the picture-gallery, the contents of which I had got up for her special edification; her reply was—I remember the very words, and the cutting tone with which they were accompanied—"Certainly not, sir!" Yet no sooner does Mr. Hugh Trevor make his appearance and ask her to do the very same thing, than she consents at once.'

'But, surely, Mr. Wood, it is a very different thing to comply with Mr. Hugh's request, who is a son of the house.'

'Oh, pardon me, Miss Lucy,' he broke in, 'but you must understand that I know your sister as well as you do; her character has been my study for years. If Mr. Hugh had been ten Mr. Hughs, or even Sir Richard himself, and she had had no desire to accept such an invitation, she would have declined it point-blank.'

Lucy was obliged to confess to herself that there were grave grounds for this conclusion.

'That is as it may be, Mr. Wood, but I fail even now to see in what I can oblige you.'

'Simply to find out for me, at once, the worst that I already guess. No, I don't mean that. Of course, I have some hope—just a little scrap; now and then Miss Clara has been almost kind to me. Oh, Miss Lucy, if you knew how I love her!'

'I am very sorry for you, Mr. Wood,' said Lucy. There was genuine compassion in her tone, but it was very firm.

'You think it would do more harm than good to speak for me?'

'It would do neither harm nor good, so far as the result was concerned; there is not the slightest chance.'

'Not now, of course,' he put in desperately; 'but in course of time, perhaps—if she finds no better man, or is disappointed in him she finds, I could wait and keep silence. Do think, Miss Lucy, how I must love her, since I thus humiliate myself before you.' His face was pale with passion and distorted by despair; his supple, skilful fingers were twisting themselves in and out in a sort of nervous frenzy; the perspiration stood upon his brow. It was a case, as Lucy thought, which required, in the patient's own professional language, 'the promptest treatment,' nay, even 'the actual cautery,' though she pitied him from the bottom of her heart.

'You have not only not the slightest, but not the remotest chance with Clara, Mr. Wood,' she answered. 'I am cruel to say so, you may think, but I should be much more cruel to deceive you with false hopes. If you insist upon my speaking to my sister I will do so; but if you have any regard for her friendship, I warn you, it will deprive you of it.'

'Then do not speak,' he murmured hoarsely. 'I ask your pardon for speaking to *you*. Let everything be as it was before; or indeed as it *is*,' he added bitterly, 'for I knew it would be so from the first. *Good*-bye, *good*-bye, Miss Lucy!' and the poor doctor sprang up the steps, and sped by a back way to the stables, where his hard-worked horse was passing one happy hour in unaccustomed clover.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DUTIFUL SON.

THE moral duty supposed to be incumbent on parents to love all their children equally is one comparatively easy to fulfil whilst their offspring are very young, but which every year renders more difficult. As the character of each develops there arises more or less of antagonism to the views and opinions, or to the wants and wishes, of the heads of the house; and even if no misconduct is actually committed, such as might seriously affect the scale, it is rare indeed if some sort of prejudice is not created. One excellent mother contesting this theory once observed, 'For my part, if my house was on fire, I should not know which of my six children to save first;' an argument, however, which scarcely meets the case, since the very sense of preference in a catastrophe so extreme might induce the contrary course to that which nature suggested. As a general rule, I think there is and must be some sort of preference, even in what

Mr. Jingle called 'the best regulated families,' and that, unless injudiciously manifested, it is acquiesced in patiently enough. It is probable that the cause is recognised, and even possible that the justice of it is acknowledged ; and, moreover, it is by no means uncommon that in course of time (for the force of time can hardly be overrated) the first favourite falls into the second rank, or even lower, and he who seemed to be 'an outsider' takes his place. It is noteworthy, indeed, that in spite of our acquiescence in the law of duty in this matter, there is a tacit acknowledgment of its frequent failure ; 'the father,' it is proverbially said, 'sticks to his girls, the mother to her boys ;' 'the youngest is always the dearest,' etc., etc. But there are many unhappy cases, arising generally from the conduct of our children themselves, but very often from our own, where there is not even the outward semblance of an equal love. Such was the case with the Trevors and their offspring. Hugh was his mother's idol ; while Charles, though by no means an object of worship with his father, was something more than his favourite son. Sir Richard's capacities for affection were not nearly so great as those of his wife ; but she had nothing to complain of in his love for herself ; it was unstinted and unshared, which hers was not, for he had a rival, and a successful one, in his own son.

From the very first Lady Trevor had regarded her elder child with the affection a mother ever extends to the more delicate and fragile of her offspring ; his weakness, it is true, was not of the physical sort, but it was never absent from her eyes. She had no fear that he would not be reared, but that he would not succeed to the honours and estate of his father. After the birth of his younger brother, her apprehensions on this account were redoubled, and it is not too much to say that she regretted that she had borne him. She foresaw not only an increased danger to which Hugh's future was thereby exposed, but the moral difficulties it opened up, which did not till long afterwards arouse her husband's attention.

Sir Richard, though capable enough of action on occasion, was at heart averse to worry and trouble of all kinds. If his wife's devotion to Hugh, or her indifference to Charles, had been less demonstrative, he would not, perhaps, have so much concerned himself with the wrong that was eventually to be done the latter, by the concealment of his brother's illegitimacy. But as time went on, and the difference of treatment which the two boys received at their mother's hands became more marked, Sir Richard's scruples were aroused from their slumber. He thought it very hard that Charlie should not only be deprived of his rights in the future, but have a bad time of it, through Hugh, even in the present. He did not understand that the behaviour

of Lady Trevor in this matter arose as much from her doubt of Hugh's eventual succession to his father's place, as from her preference for him over his brother. It was always possible that her secret would be discovered, when the law would, of course, take its course, and her beloved son be disinherited. It was this consideration that had prompted her to remain so long at Minard, where disclosure was almost impossible, and, above all, not to return to Mirbridge, where it was most likely to happen. She had more upon her soul than the guilt of concealment; for she had broken a promise to the dead. Unknown to her husband, she had promised his mother on her death-bed—the woman who had been so unwisely kind to her, and to whom she owed all she had in the world—that justice should be done. She had died at peace in that belief, but she had been deceived. The promise had been kept to her to the ear, indeed—for Hugh's mother, as we have seen, contended that justice, though not legal right, was done in concealing his illegitimacy—but had been broken in the spirit. No reparation of wrong-doing had been made; the poor woman had promised what she was unable to perform; she had said to herself a hundred times with agony and remorse, 'I cannot, cannot do it.' It was not from the confession of her own shame to the world at large that she shrank, but from the thought that Hugh should know it.

It was a terrible time to her when Sir Richard fell ill, and the idea of returning to his native air first took his fancy; she combated it with all her powers; she was ashamed of her own arts, as she pleaded this and that against his purpose upon the score of his health, whereas his health was not in her mind at all; but the sick man's yearning was too much for her. The associations of home, combined with his sense of physical decay, had turned his mind, as she had feared it would do, into that channel which she would have fain closed for ever; it was only with a dead lift, as it were, by appealing to his affection for her, and the wrong he had done her long ago, that she had obtained his promise to be silent on the matter; and though he was a man—with the exception that belongs to a man—to keep his word, his conscience once awakened was not easily calmed. Thus, though he had consented, however unwillingly, that his younger son should suffer wrong, his mind was disquieted about him as it had not been for a quarter of a century about anything; and since reparation was out of his power, he was resolved to do all he could for him in the way of kindness. Even this (so difficult is the way of sinners) was a misfortune, since it accentuated the difference of regard in which he held him with respect to Hugh; and, indeed, the cold reception he had just given to his elder son arose in part, though most irrationally, from his pity for the younger. It was not his habit to interfere with the behaviour

of his belongings in any way ; an angry oath or two was all that Hugh's extravagances had ever drawn from him, and it had never entered into his mind to inquire into the manner in which his offspring spent their time. But now a solicitude arose in him respecting Charlie which overcame his natural indolence, and since he could not give him what was his due, he resolved to favour him with what he felt was but a poor substitute for it, but still all he had to give, namely—a word of warning.

Fathers have different ways of administering advice to their sons ; some are always playing the part of Mr. Barlow to their Sandfords and Mertons ; some call them into their study, and, standing with their backs to the fire, deliver a didactic harangue, which the recipient terms a jobation. Some wrap it up in mincing words, like medicine in jam, or even accompany it with a tip—a veritable silver pill ; others, again, serve it up *au naturel*, with a horsewhip. But all agree in this, that during the administration of the paternal advice, the name by which, for love and euphony, their offspring is generally known is dropped, and their baptismal name is substituted for it ; Willy becomes William, Jimmy James, and Max Maximilian. Even young Trevor, who had had no experience of parental jobations, knew that something serious was about to be said to him in those 'few words' when his father prefaced them with 'Come along, Charles,' instead of Charlie.

He obeyed him, however, very cheerfully, though it involved his leaving Lucy *tête-à-tête* with the handsome doctor—a circumstance which did not, indeed, give him much apprehension, for he had too good an opinion of himself, as well as too much confidence in the understanding that already existed between him and the young lady, to be jealous.

The governor had always been kind to him, and he was not in the least afraid of him, though perhaps a little deficient (which was not altogether his own fault) in the respect which a son owes his parent. As he lit his cigar, by invitation, at that of Sir Richard, he saw that his father's face wore an expression of unusual gravity, which corroborated his suspicion that something was about to be said to him 'for his own good.'

'Charles, my boy,' began Sir Richard gently, 'you will do me the justice to admit that I have never interfered with my sons' pleasures, nor given them long lectures, nor acted the schoolmaster towards them in any way. If I have not been a good father to them, I have been at least an easy one.'

'You have been very kind to me, sir, all my life,' returned the young man, falling unconsciously into an unwonted state of reverence, for his feelings were easily moved, whether for good or ill, and his heart was a tender one.

'Well, I hope so, Charles, for I meant to be kind. On the

other hand, I fear I have given you your heads too much, though, so far as I know, you have never taken the bit between your teeth, or kicked over the traces. The time is coming soon, my lad, when you will be your own master, and, I am deeply sorry to say, the master of very little else.'

'I dare say I shall get on well enough ; don't let that trouble you, father.' He was really desirous to save his father pain, and had also a personal dislike to business matters, common to most young fellows of his age, but in his case also inherited.

'It does trouble me, however, very much,' said Sir Richard uncomfortably ; 'you know generally, I suppose, that Mirbridge is entailed upon the elder son, and that your own portion—if it can be called so—will be extremely small. It will be necessary for you to employ the talents you undoubtedly possess—and for which, among other things, my lad, I am so proud of you—in getting your own living.'

'Oh, I shall do very well, no doubt ; I have not expensive tastes, you know, father, as—as some young fellows have.'

Sir Richard knew that it had been on the tip of his son's tongue to say 'as Hugh has,' and in his heart he thanked him for the substitution of phrase. He wanted to keep as clear of Hugh just now as possible.

'But, my poor boy, it is not a question of expensive tastes ; it is a question of getting a livelihood. This is becoming, I am told, more difficult to do at the Bar, as elsewhere, every day. What I want you to do is to look matters well in the face, and if you have a chance in any direction, not to throw it away. You are a good-looking and sociable young fellow, and as likely to take a woman's fancy as any man I know. I don't want you to be a fortune-hunter, but it is absolutely necessary, if you intend to marry, that you should choose some girl with money of her own. Do you clearly understand that ?'

'I understand how nice it would be if the girl I liked could be also an heiress,' answered Charlie, with an uncomfortable little laugh.

'It is not a laughing matter, Charles ; I entreat you to heed what I say upon this matter. Your future prospects are unpropitious enough at present, but if you marry a penniless girl, they will be deplorable indeed. I don't say anything about the ruin of the girl herself, for I am thinking of you and not of her ; but if you really love her, you may perhaps think of her a little.'

Charlie blushed from brow to chin, and looked very grave and disquieted. He made no further effort to laugh matters off ; nor did he even dare to ask what young woman was being referred to ; but only answered with a sigh : 'It is very hard upon a fellow, father.'

'It is very hard upon you, Charles,' was the grave reply. 'I

pity you, my dear boy, more than I can say' (which was very true), 'nor can I blame you for having succumbed to such unusual charms as I see have captivated you. I was inflammable myself at your age; and I dare say if at three-and-twenty I had seen that girl, I should have thrown all I had at her feet, but then you see *I* had something to throw. Your mother thinks, indeed, that there is no danger, that the girl looks for a good match, and would throw you over for it to-morrow, but there is no safety for her, not even in her ambition, in my opinion, when a woman is once really in love.'

And Sir Richard sighed, not without reason.

Charlie, who had looked the picture of melancholy, began on the other hand to pluck up a little. It was clear to him that it was not his Lucy who was being described, for she had not one grain of ambition in her composition: a violet by a mossy stone half hidden from the eye, and waiting only for his hand, and no other to pluck it: nor was it difficult to guess who had been mistaken for her. For his part, her sister's simpler charms had put Clara's into the background from the first; but he was quite aware that he was in a minority of one upon that point. No man had opened his lips to him in Mirbridge about the Thornes without raving about Clara's beauty: his father, he knew, admired her immensely; and it had been plain that very afternoon how his brother's eyes had been at once attracted to her marvellous beauty.

What men, indeed, thought of Clara Thorne was obvious by the behaviour of Mr. Wood, who paid his attentions to Lucy with the sole object of getting her to say a good word for him in all good faith, and without the least idea that they could be liable to misconstruction. Even though Charles himself was not under the spell of the enchantress, he could understand the power she wielded over others, and it now suddenly struck him that she might be the unconscious means of getting him out of his present difficulty. To give up Lucy was, in fact, a thing impossible to him; to pretend to give her up, and not to do so, was almost equally so; for falseness was opposed to his nature; and, again, to deny his father the one thing he had ever asked of him in his life, and asked, too, with such kindly pleading and for his own good, was distasteful to him in the highest degree. What, therefore, alone remained for him was to take advantage of Sir Richard's mistake to temporise a little.

Such a course of action, it was true, involved some duplicity, of which he was heartily ashamed; but a popular philosopher has assured us that 'we must stop somewhere' in the path of virtue, and this is where Charles Trevor stopped.

'I don't quite understand what it is you want me to do, father,' he said, after a long pause.

'My dear boy,' answered Sir Richard, laying his hand once more upon his shoulder (a sign of affection which this time made him wince), 'it is something rather which I wish you *not* to do: do not entangle yourself with a young woman, be she beautiful as a goddess, whom to marry would be to a poor man madness; promise me, upon your word and honour, Charles, that you will give up all pursuit of Clara Thorne.'

'But really, although, of course, I admire her very much,' hesitated the young fellow, 'I never did pursue her.'

'Well, well, it may have been my mistake,' said Sir Richard, good-humouredly; 'in which case so much the better.'

He took his son's embarrassed manner for a tacit admission that his own impression had been correct; but that fortunately he had spoken in time.

Charles, on his part, had made an effort to be frank, which, while it salved his conscience, had cost him nothing.

CHAPTER XVII.

JENNY BEETON.

It is probable that a company of visitors have rarely gone over 'a show-place'—as country mansions important enough for exhibition are called—under such curious circumstances as the little party of four who were now investigating the very moderate attractions of Trevor Court. Hugh, the son and heir, knew no more about them than his friend the artist, for it was the first time either of them had set foot in the house. Lady Trevor, of course, was well informed about them, but it was her *rôle* to appear otherwise; to show just as much knowledge, and no more, as would have been picked up by a sojourner for a few days. The cicerone of the party was, therefore, Clara Thorne, who herself had only been inside the Court since it had been getting ready for its present inmates, and had gleaned what she knew from the housekeeper, who, in her turn, had acquired her information at second-hand from many sources. Clara threw herself into the part at once, which, though in some degree a menial one, admitted of a stiff and exclusive style which became her admirably.

'Here,' she would say, with a grand air and a sweep of her shapely arm, 'is the red drawing-room, and this is the blue; observe the mosaic flooring of the Great Hall, if you please, and the ceiling of the ball-room, painted by Chambino.'

With this majestic drollery the two gentlemen were delighted, though they expressed it in different ways; Hugh looked at her with an approbation that seemed extorted from him—for as a general rule it was beneath his dignity to be amused; while Mr. Gurdon clapped his hands in uncontrolled admiration. Lady

Trevor, who appreciated the cleverness of Clara's acting at least as much as either of them, by no means equally approved of it ; the girl was dangerous enough from her beauty, but was still more so from her wit, which, moreover, as it now struck her ladyship, had never before been manifested in her presence ; it was strange that Hugh's arrival should have offered the first opportunity for its display ; on the other hand she was so pleased to see her son pleased that she could not help partaking in his enjoyment.

The Court, as has been said, though a fine house, was of moderate dimensions. It was not one of those enormous mansions like Blenheim or Lowther Castle, the hugeness of which suggests rather an Hotel de Ville than Home. Though numerous, the living-rooms were not in excess of possible requirement ; and, though a picture-gallery has been spoken of, it was but one of the corridors, itself used as a sitting-room in the summer time, which bore that ambitious title. The pictures themselves were, with few exceptions, of small value, and were nearly all ancestral portraits—for the Trevor family was much more ancient than its present domicile.

'That's a handsome face, though I should say not a good face,' observed Mr. Gurdon, pointing out a portrait a little in advance of them.

'If gentlemen would be kind enough to wait till objects of interest have been reached in their proper order,' observed the amateur housekeeper reprovingly, 'my duties would be less onerous.'

'Bravo, bravo!' cried Hugh, clapping his hands ; 'consider yourself sat upon, Gurdon.'

'I am flat as a pancake,' replied the little painter, putting the palms of his hands together penitently ; 'it would only serve me right if Miss Thorne did not satisfy my curiosity at all.'

'That would be rather a severe punishment,' answered Clara in her natural manner, 'for your professional eye, Mr. Gurdon, has picked out not only the best picture, but one in the whole collection, and the only one, as it happens, which has a history. That, though a member of the House of Trevor, I always call "the Schoolmistress."'

Directly the word had left her lips, she felt as if she would have given all she had in the world to recall it. The very fact of her using it should indeed have been a guarantee that she was unacquainted with the unfortunate occurrence that had driven Sir Richard from his home ; but if it was known either to Lady Trevor or her son, the association of ideas could hardly have escaped them. It was quite a relief to her mind when her hostess, though not until after an uncomfortable pause had expired, inquired in dry, indifferent tones, 'Why the Schoolmistress, Miss Thorne ? I have been told it is the family Ghost.'

'Delightful! exclaimed Mr. Gurdon. 'Hugh, you never told me there was a Ghost at the Court.'

'He was afraid lest *you* should be afraid, no doubt,' said Clara. 'I think it was very considerate of Mr. Trevor.'

'Thanks,' said Hugh, with a smile that was not wholly good-natured, for he did not much relish being apologized for; 'but let us have the Schoolmistress first, and the Ghost afterwards.'

'Well, sir, one of your ancestors, somewhere between now and the flood, took for his second wife this lady, one Annabel Hood, who had a very great influence over him, as you may easily believe by her portrait.'

The face pictured on the canvas was certainly resolute of purpose enough; the features, though regular and handsome, with a certain sternness that almost amounted to cruelty, the lips thin and very slightly curved; the arm stretched forward as if in the act of command.

'A termagant, if you crossed her, I should think,' was Mr. Gurdon's criticism. 'I would not have been her husband for a trifle.'

'What do *you* think, Mr. Trevor?'

'A bad-tempered woman, no doubt; but I flatter myself I should have found a way to break her in,' answered the young man grimly.

'Oh, Hugh, how can you talk so!' exclaimed Lady Trevor. 'You speak of your ancestress as if she was a vicious horse. Miss Thorne is quite frightened at you.'

'No, indeed, I am not frightened, Lady Trevor,' answered Clara; nor, in truth, did she look so; her eyes, on the contrary, regarded the young man with a certain approbation. 'The fact is, I rather sympathize with your son's severity, for this woman deserved it. She was a cruel creature. Her husband had a son—Claude: his picture is on the wall yonder, with its back to his stepmother's, as well it may be, for she killed him.'

'Killed him!' exclaimed Mr. Gurdon, in horrified accents.

'Yes. The boy was very slow at his letters—very literally at his letters, for he could not even learn to write—and his lady mother, who was a blue-stocking as well as a martinet, adopting the custom of those good old days, used to beat him severely. One day, when he was very stupid at his writing-lesson, she struck him over the head with a ruler, and the poor lad's troubles were ended for ever. That is the story, is it not, Lady Trevor?'

'I am afraid it is.'

'By Jingo,' ejaculated Hugh, with unwonted interest, 'I hope they didn't hang her for it. I shouldn't like to have an ancestress who was hanged.'

'It seems to me,' said Mr. Gurdon, 'that it's just as bad to have had one who deserved hanging.'

'Ah, but then you never had an ancestress, old fellow,' said Hugh, with a coarse laugh. Then, perceiving not so much his own rudeness as the effect of it on his friend's face, he added hastily, 'You see, the longer the line of them, the more certain one must be of having some wicked ones amongst them. One doesn't mind a murderess or two in such a genealogy as mine, provided there is no flaw in it. They may be as sinister as they please, but there must be no *bar* sinister. Well, Miss Thorne, and what was done to your writing-mistress?'

'Nothing; only when she was put in her grave she was not permitted to rest there. Her spirit still haunts a certain room in the Court, which is said to have been the boy's schoolroom, and there she is seen o' nights washing her blood-stained hands.'

'They ought also to be inky,' observed Hugh sardonically.

'They *are*, sir,' replied Clara reprovingly. 'In that very room, about fifty years ago, during the removal of an oak window-shutter of the sixteenth century, there were found, pushed behind the joists of the skirting, a quantity of antique copy-books of that period, on several of which Claude Trevor's name was scrawled, and every page was covered with blots.'

'I need not ask if she is dressed like the picture,' observed Hugh sceptically; 'in these cases the eye only sees what it brings with it.'

'I beg your pardon; the spectre is always in black and white.'

'Like a negative of a photograph, eh?'

'I am afraid you are very material in your ideas, sir. She is restricted to those colours as a part of her punishment (for she had a pretty taste in dress), and also to typify what caused her crime—the blots in the copy-books.'

'I don't think it's good form in a ghost-storyteller,' remarked Mr. Gurdon, 'to make game of her ghost; blood is thicker than water, but it is not like Devonshire cream, to be curdled or not, according to the taste and fancy of the dairymaid.'

'If you talk of form,' put in Hugh quickly, 'it is not good form to compare a young lady to a dairymaid.'

'Never mind,' said Clara generously; 'I will return good for evil by showing Mr. Gurdon the gem of the whole collection. There is Romney's "Blue Girl," so called, I suppose, in opposition to Gainsborough's *chef d'œuvre*.'

'How strange that it should have been put in the dark, where half its merits must remain concealed,' remarked Mr. Gurdon.

'But it used not to be hung in that recess,' observed Lady Trevor; 'so at least the housekeeper told me.'

The latter part of the sentence was in the same tone as the former, or almost in the same tone; no one, unless he had cause to suspect its existence, could have noticed the join. But the rush of blood to her face was beyond the speaker's power to

hinder. It seemed a strange thing to Clara that her hostess should be angry—for it looked like anger—about so small a matter.

'I am afraid there was a reason for it,' said Mr. Gurdon gravely, who had been examining the picture with great nicety; 'I wonder the picture was ever suffered to hang in the light—it is a copy.'

'Come, I say, none of that,' cried Hugh indignantly; 'no jokes at the expense of the family, I do beg.'

'It's a copy,' reiterated the artist confidently, as he concluded his examination. 'I'll stake my professional reputation upon it.'

'Then I'll bet twopence it is not,' laughed Hugh; 'that will be about an even wager.'

Mr. Gurdon's face again wore an angry flush; it was easy to see that he was restraining himself with difficulty.

'Of course you ought to know, Mr. Gurdon,' put in Lady Trevor hastily; 'as for Hugh and the rest of us, our opinion is worth nothing as compared with yours; but certainly Sir Richard has always understood it to be a Romney. I remember it was even asked for—only we were away from home and could not arrange about it—by the Committee of the Royal Academy, for one of their Exhibitions of the Old English School, and as being a well-known specimen of Romney's.'

'What do you say now, Mr. Incredulous?' inquired Hugh meaningly.

'I say that though I don't hesitate to affirm that you are wrong, I should not dream of contradicting your mother.'

'Now I call that very pretty,' cried Lady Trevor, with her sweetest smile. 'Mr. Gurdon keeps his own opinion, except where a lady is concerned, in which case, as the proverb says, "All other things give place"—Miss Thorne, your sister will think we have spirited you away; it is time we should relieve her mind.'

As chance had left Lucy in Mr. Charles's company, Clara had a shrewd suspicion that she was not much disquieted about her absence, but at this hint of Lady Trevor's wishes she fell in with them at once.

'I have now shown you all the rooms,' she said in the true official manner, 'to which the public in the absence of the family are admitted.'

'Oh, hang it, let us go on,' remonstrated Hugh. 'How about this room, for instance?'

'You must not go in there. It is Mrs. Grange's private sitting-room, Hugh,' exclaimed his mother.

But he had already opened the door and entered. It was a well-furnished, handsome room enough, but on the table in place of ornament was a great heap of house-linen, apparently new, on which two women were busily engaged. One was Mrs. Grange, the housekeeper, who wielded an instrument known in

domestic circles as a flat-iron; the other was a singularly graceful-looking girl, with a pen in one hand, and a tiny bottle of ink in the other. This latter she put down in great confusion as the visitors entered, and blushed as though she had been caught in the commission of some serious crime; to all appearance, forgery. The circumstance that Hugh Trevor's bold eyes were fixed on her was reason enough for it—for there was that in his glance when it fell on a pretty girl which has been well described 'as making a woman shiver, and a gentleman's right toe itch,' but it was also owing to the nature of her occupation. The housekeeper herself also looked both disturbed and annoyed at being discovered in it.

'A thousand pardons, Mrs. Grange,' cried Lady Trevor; 'your door was opened by mistake, as our little party were going over the Court.'

'You are very welcome, my lady, I am sure,' was the housekeeper's reply, as she placed her flat-iron on its stand, and curtsied.

'But I owe you ever so much more of an apology, Mrs. Grange!' put in Clara, 'for I have been usurping your functions, and what is more, in a very inadequate manner; I have absolutely failed to convince one of these two gentlemen that your Romney is an original.'

'This is the sceptic in question,' said Hugh, pointing to Gurdon; 'what ought to be done with him?'

'There is the hot-iron and the marking ink,' observed Clara significantly. 'It is for Mrs. Grange to decide.'

'Well, I'm sure I don't know, Miss Thorne,' said the housekeeper, on whom strokes of humour were lost; 'but the Romney has been always thought very highly of by artist gentlemen. It is the best picture, as I have been informed, in the collection.'

'But you told Lady Trevor that it did not use to hang in the recess; what was the cause of its change of place?'

'*I* told my lady! oh dear no,' replied Mrs. Grange confidently 'I never heard of its having been hung anywhere else.'

'It was doubtless the butler who told her,' observed Clara indifferently. Lady Trevor was paying no heed to the conversation, though its subject was herself; her whole attention was absorbed by the young girl. It was the same—she had recognised at a glance—she had met on the road, when in the pony carriage, with Mrs. Thorne.

Hugh was talking to her in a jesting way about her handwriting. 'It is really beautiful,' he said; 'you write on linen—like the ancient Egyptians—better than I can do on paper.'

There was something in his specious tone that jarred upon Lady Trevor's ear; something in his smiling face which distressed and annoyed her more than his grimmest and least dutiful look had ever done. Something that bitterly reminded

her of the Past, and also filled her with fears for the Future. Lady Trevor, for the first time in her life, was seriously angry with her son.

'Hugh,' she cried with severity, 'you have not yet been introduced to Mrs. Grange, whose privacy you have invaded.'

'It was very wrong, but I can't say I am sorry for it,' he answered lightly, as he put out his hand to the housekeeper, 'since otherwise I should have had to wait for the privilege. Perhaps she will tell me—since her daughter will not—what these mysterious letters H. and J. stand for?'

'But it is not my daughter, sir,' replied Mrs. Grange nervously; then turning to Lady Trevor she added, 'It is Jenny Beeton, my lady, who is going to be married to my son Harry; we are marking the house linen, of which I have made a present to the young couple.'

'You must allow me to add my mite,' said Lady Trevor graciously; 'but she looks very young for a bride.'

'Jenny is twenty-one, my lady; my son is not much older, but he has obtained a situation for himself in London, and will soon have a home to offer her, I am glad to say, and fair prospects.'

Lady Trevor's eyes sparkled with pleasure; it was a pleasant trait in her mistress, thought the housekeeper, that she should rejoice in the happiness of this young couple of whom she knew nothing.

'So she is to live in London, is she? that is a long way from her own people, Mrs. Grange.'

'Why, yes, my lady; but, you see, she has no mother.'

Lady Trevor raised her head sympathetically; but what she heard was, in fact, good news to her. If her brother's wife, whom she had never seen, had been alive, she might have found one source of complication the more.

'But she has a father, I hope.'

'Yes, my lady,' returned the housekeeper in embarrassed tones; 'but he lost his wife very young, and has been so long used to fend for himself that he will not miss Jenny much.'

'I hope you will be happy with your husband, my dear,' said Lady Trevor, addressing the girl for the first time. 'You are neat and tidy, and you write a good hand; you must let me see something of you before you leave us.'

'She is up at the Court most days, my lady; that is,' added the housekeeper, smiling, 'she used to be before Harry came home; I don't know how it will be with her now.'

'And where is your son staying?'

'Farmer Wurzel has been so good as to take him in, my lady, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne, and my poor husband, as once had a farm of his own. Mr. Beeton offered to have him at his cottage, but I thought it better not.'

'Much better not,' answered Lady Trevor. The next moment she regretted the speech, feeling that she had been too emphatic for the occasion; what had caused her to be so was the notion of keeping all that belonged to the Court as far apart from Spinney Cottage as possible.

'Oh, it's not *that*, ma'am,' said the housekeeper with a flush, and dropping her voice; 'my Harry is as honest as the day, and would never presume upon opportunity; but he and Mr. Beeton are not much of a mind, and it is just as well they should not see too much of one another.'

'What is Mr. Beeton?'

'Well, I hardly know what he calls himself, my lady; if you asked him he would say he lived upon his means, though there is no sign of it in what he is doing for Jenny. She has had a hard time of it, poor girl, I reckon. She has had much to contend with on account of her belongings. Indeed, her father has more than once got into trouble about the game.'

'But why should he poach if, as he says, he has means of his own?'

'You may well say that, my lady; it is difficult for a woman to understand why a man should hanker after hares and pheasants who has meat in his pot at home; but so it is. It's bred in the bone with some of them.'

'Jenny looks, however, neat and modest, as if she had been well brought up.'

'No thanks to her father; though, for that matter, he is fond enough of the girl. He is too handy with his glass to have done his duty by his daughter. But some people seem to be born good, though the parson tells us otherwise, and Jenny is one of that sort.'

'She has had bad belongings, too, you say, as well as her father.'

'Well, so 'tis said, my lady,' murmured the housekeeper, with reluctance; 'but it would be a sin and a shame to cast that up against the girl at this time of day.'

'But what *was* it?'

'It was long before my time, and I don't rightly know, my lady,' returned the housekeeper; 'but whatever it was, it has counted against her. It seems hard that innocent people should suffer for the wrong-doing of others, but so it is. It won't wash out any more than that marking-ink when the hot iron has been clapped upon it: but it spreads and spreads, and there's no knowing how far it won't go.'

'That is very true,' s ghed Lady Trevor. So wrapped up had she been in conversation with the housekeeper that she had paid no attention to the young people.

Clara Thorne, who, of course, was well acquainted with Jenny, had come down, like a goddess from her cloud, to rescue her

from Hugh's attentions. His 'chaff,' though harmless and good-natured enough, was evidently not appreciated; it was a relief to her when Clara broke off the conversation she was holding with Mr. Gurdon, and began, rather to her astonishment, talking to her about her eggs and poultry, just as Miss Lucy might have done.

'And what are you going to do with your little farm family when you marry?' she inquired.

'Please, miss, Farmer Ward has offered to buy my fowls.'

'Then mind he gives you the proper price for them,' said Clara, laughing; 'they say he drives rather a hard bargain.'

'Sell them to *me*, Miss Jenny,' exclaimed Hugh, with ludicrous earnestness; 'I doat on fowls.'

'Spitchcocked and with mushrooms,' put in Mr. Gurdon scornfully; 'why, I don't believe, Hugh, you have ever *seen* a fowl with his feathers on. Now I am come down here to paint a farmyard, and must have fowls, and I will give a fancy price for them.'

Jenny looked from one to the other with amazement, mingled with alarm. 'The gentlemen are joking, Miss Clara,' she said perplexedly.

'Then if I were you, I would make them pay for their joke, Jenny. If you'll give me a little commission, I'll sell your fowls to them for you.'

'No, no,' exclaimed Mr. Gurdon merrily, 'no third parties will be treated with. It must be principals only, no middle-man.'

'And above all we must see the fowls,' protested Hugh.

'There must, of course, be a Private View,' assented the painter. 'Admission by card, or, what would be still better, by invitation from the proprietress, like a Show Sunday.'

To Jenny the whole of this was as unintelligible as though it had been spoken in a strange tongue. It was evident that the gentlefolk were in high good-humour, however, and she was not disinclined to send her eggs (and the fowls too) to the best market.

'I will ask father,' said she simply.

'She will ask papa,' cried Hugh; 'what do you think of that, Miss Thorne?'

'I should say she had done it already,' said Clara, pointing to the house-linen.

The laughter which followed this sally attracted Lady Trevor's attention. 'What are you all laughing at?' she inquired; 'not at Jenny, I hope,' she added reproachfully.

'It was only at a very poor joke of mine, which is not worth repetition,' answered Clara. 'These gentlemen propose to bid for Jenny's effects—her fowls and farm produce—against Farmer Ward, when she leaves Mirbridge; and they want to go to Spinney Cottage to inspect them.'

'What nonsense! I will have nothing of the kind,' said Lady Trevor with severity. 'Now go along all of you.' She drove them laughing before her, like a flock of sheep; a shepherdess well pleased that one of them at least should have proved so docile; and shut the door upon them. Then with a grave face she addressed the housekeeper.

'You must make Jenny understand, Mrs. Grange, that what these young gentlemen have been saying to her is all nonsense. It is not her fault,' she added quickly, seeing the girl's tears were very near her eyes; 'but I think Miss Thorne ought to have stopped it.'

That the young lady in question did not hold herself quite free of blame may be gathered from the observation she was at that very moment making to her two cavaliers.

'I am afraid Lady Trevor is angry with me for permitting you to bargain with poor Jenny, though I had only her own advantage in view.'

'I can't think *that*,' said Mr. Gurdon consolingly; 'even Farmer Ward himself could hardly have imagined that we were serious in our pretence of disturbing the home market.'

It was not Mr. Gurdon, but Hugh Trevor, to whom she had looked for a reply; but Hugh was engaged with his note-book, in which he was setting down in his microscopic hand the words 'Spinney Cottage.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

HUGH TREVOR MAKES TERMS.

COUNTRY people have always the reputation of being more hospitable than those who dwell in town. It must be owned, however, that they have more reason to be so, for the country, with all its charms, is a trifle dull. A guest, unless he is altogether below the average, is a godsend. Even if he is not witty himself, he is the cause of wit in others, or at lowest a topic of conversation that contrasts favourably with local personages about whom everything has long been said that can be said. Moreover, he is unconsciously a civilizing element; the members of the family cease to bicker in his presence; the young ladies in particular will, if he is a bachelor and eligible, affect an angelic fondness for one another, which, if occasionally diversified by a passage of arms—or tongues—only shows them to be not 'too bright and good for human nature's daily food.' He is an excuse for pleasant little excursions which the aborigines of themselves would never dream of taking, and would be bored to distraction if they did. The possession of him is not a mere selfish pleasure; he is a motive to the neighbours for calling; he is a feature to the villagers in church.

To any country house Mr. Gurdon would have been a most attractive addition; he was agreeable, and had a good deal of tact; he could talk about other things than his art; was easily pleased, and, what is of more consequence, had a desire to please others: and on his own account, and not at all as the friend of his introducer, he soon made himself welcome at Mirbridge. But he was, after all, a superfluous luxury there—almost a waste, since he was so much more wanted in other country mansions. To the Trevor family all about their own house was novel and full of interest; it was a complete change from anything they had known elsewhere; they got on admirably—though in very different fashions—with the household at the Rectory, and desired no other acquaintances.

There were times, indeed, when Hugh condemned himself in vehement terms for having brought that fellow Gurdon down with him; he had expected life to be so *triste* at Mirbridge, that his company would have been indispensable, and finding that this was not so, he left to others the task—by no means a difficult one—of entertaining his friend. Why they were friends at all it is hard to say, and would be futile to inquire into, such cases being by no means rare; one might just as well attempt to speculate 'why that man ever married that woman.'

Hugh was cynical, vicious, overbearing and lavish; Gurdon was good-natured, independent, well-principled, and poor. They had nothing but youth and a club in common—at the latter they met, played billiards, smoked, and occasionally dined together; the painter introduced Hugh to his artistic circle, the Bohemian side of which proved attractive to him; but it was not sufficiently pronounced for his tastes.

'You English artists,' he said to his friend, in a tone of disappointment, 'are so infernally respectable.'

'I am sorry,' was the dry rejoinder; 'but while you are with us I think we maintain a fair average of vice.'

If Hugh looked for any toadyism from Gurdon, on account of his superior wealth or position, he looked in vain; the painter's tongue was as free as his touch. He had accepted the other's invitation to the Court without the least sense of having laid himself under an obligation in so doing; but now that he was there he felt some gratitude to his introducer. The place was wholly to his taste, and not the less so because he saw little of Hugh.

He was always one of the tennis party, *vice* poor Dr. Wood, resigned—or, at all events, submitting—to the Inevitable; but otherwise he was left a good deal to himself. He had plenty of employment for his brush, both without and within doors. The Rector always welcomed him as a companion on his parish rounds. The atmosphere of luxury in which the young man

lived was novel to him, and suited with his artistic nature. Though his eyes were chiefly for the picturesque, they marked what was going on about him, and in his quiet way he took a great deal of intelligent interest in what he saw.

As to Clara Thorne, he fell at her feet like the rest of his fellow-men. He thought her the divinest woman he had ever beheld, and yearned to paint her. She had promised conditionally. 'Perhaps,' she said, 'and if he were very good indeed. But her consent in reality depended not on his own behaviour at all, but whether it chanced to suit her in respect of its being agreeable to other people, or rather to one person.

The proposition, which Mr. Gurdon had made in public, had brought a frown upon Hugh's forehead, and it was Clara's object to keep it smooth. The matter was therefore in abeyance; but she made herself very pleasant to Mr. Gurdon, at first, because he was Hugh Trevor's friend, and afterwards on his own account.

In general popularity at the Rectory the painter almost rivalled Charles; but Hugh was not a favourite there. Lucy, for some reason of her own which she did not disclose, disliked him very cordially, and omitted to blame his brother for that unfraternal feeling which now and again peeped out as of yore in that otherwise easy-going and good-natured young fellow. The Rector held his peace about him, which was a very bad sign; it was his nature to see good in men rather than evil, and especially in persons whom Providence had preferred to high places, such as 'a position in the county.'

What Mrs. Thorne thought of Hugh, Lucy ventured to tell her sister a few weeks after his arrival, as they were 'doing' one another's hair one evening—for they had no lady's-maid—before dining at the Court. They had been discussing the young man together in a guarded way: that is to say, Lucy had been saying things to his detriment, on the authority of others rather than as the expression of any personal opinion, and Clara had been defending him with a sort of jocose indifference which, as the other was well aware, masked her private view of him.

'I don't think you can deny,' said Lucy, 'that he is intensely selfish—everyone seems to agree in that.'

'His mother does not think so,' observed Clara with much gravity; 'and surely she ought to know.'

'Oh, Clara, how *can* you? As if everyone does not perceive that Lady Trevor dotes on her elder son to that extent that she thinks he cannot do wrong.'

'And does he?' said Clara, lifting her eyebrows.

'Well, I don't know about wrong; but I heard papa say that Mr. Hugh Trevor did not set a good example in the village.'

'I suppose not; I cannot imagine poor Mr. Hugh even attempting such a thing,' was the dry rejoinder. 'He is hardly the sort of man one would expect to see teaching in the Sunday-school.'

'Well, I don't know one single person in all Mirbridge who likes him—that's all,' continued Lucy seriously.

'Really? Not one? Are you quite sure not one?' said Clara, with an air of pretended coquetry which, as was usual with her fun, more alarmed than amused her sister.

'No, not one; at least, I hope not one, if that one is dear to me;' she answered very gravely.

'What a lot of ones!' exclaimed Clara critically.

'But you're not serious, Clara; I hope you are not really serious,' entreated Lucy. 'You know how charitable dear mamma is, and yet even *she* has a bad opinion of Hugh Trevor. She says he is such an unwholesome young man.'

'Very likely; she speaks as she finds; you know how mushrooms, which we are so fond of, always make her ill. Now *I* don't think Mr. Hugh Trevor at all unwholesome; he agrees with me exceedingly well;' then, in answer to Lucy's look of horror and incredulity, she added: 'Perhaps I ought to use the future tense rather than the present; if he does not quite agree with me just yet, I intend him to do so. I can't explain it to you, because you are not scientific, but there is a process of assimilation going on.'

Lucy said no more, for she knew that remonstrance was useless: she even wondered at herself for having said so much. That what she had said had not aroused her sister's anger was, it was clear, because Clara's affections were not set upon this man at all; she had only set her heart on marrying him. Lucy had suspected it from the very first; but now she had heard—or as good as heard it—from Clara's own lips. It seemed too terrible that she (Clara) could dream of entrusting her future to a man like Hugh, who did not love her, but who was to be made to love her; as if such a thing were humanly possible. Miserable as Lucy felt her sister's position to be, there was, however, no visible sign of it; she was spared the pain and humiliation of witnessing the means which Clara used to gain her end. She was above all the ordinary arts by which young women are wont to inveigle their prey—a foolish phrase enough in any case, but in this one about as applicable as it would be to the designs of a dove upon a sparrow-hawk. Not a glance was ever seen to pass from her to the object of her pursuit that could be called tender, or which could suggest a mutual understanding; no difference of tone could be heard in her voice when she addressed him from that she used to another. Even Lady Trevor, though conscious that her dear Hugh was attracted towards Clara Thorne, was

obliged to acknowledge that the girl was sensible enough to perceive the utter impossibility of anything serious coming of such a thing, and gave him no encouragement.

It was a difficult part to play, for Hugh, who was accustomed to have his own way in everything, was very open in his attentions ; about which his mother had not spoken only because she was afraid to speak. She shrank from putting herself in antagonism with him in any way; he never was so demonstrative in his affection for her as she would have had him to be, while, if any cause of disagreement arose between them, he always made her feel it by his manner. Sooner than bring this punishment upon herself, she preferred to let him have his own way in everything, or almost everything.

The Trevors had received one morning an invitation, which hospitably included Mr. Gurdon, to dine at Catesby Hall, and as a matter of course it had been decided to accept it. Sir Richard, indeed, would willingly have been excused : he remembered what country dinner-parties were like, and had no reason to hope that the entertainment in question would be any exception to them. But they were among the lesser evils which his return to Mirbridge had necessitated, and to which he had made up his mind beforehand to submit. It was perfectly obvious that he must go. As to Lady Trevor, though the prospect was still more distasteful to her (because it involved danger to her, if not to her husband), she would not have missed such an opportunity of meeting 'the county' for a thousand pounds. The introduction must be got over somehow, and it was better that it should happen at Catesby than at any less ambitious mansion ; when one is learning to swim it is better to begin in the sea. Moreover, besides the huge size of their mansion, which produced a certain impression (though it was whispered that since her husband's death Lady Joddrell had been overhoused), the family was remarkable for its respectability. Its late owner had been a great legal functionary, and had lined his nest so well, both before and after he had assumed the ermine, that he was known among the irreverent as 'Fur and Feathers'; but when he died, after purchasing the Hall, and living in it in state for a few years, Lady Joddrell found her income far too small for the old system of expenditure. On great occasions, such as the present might be fairly considered to be, she launched out, but in a general way lived quietly enough, saving money for her daughters, in case, as began to seem probable, they should not be provided for, as such dear girls deserved to be, in another way. Though there were richer and more highly-placed people in the county, there was no one who could impress the proper stamp upon a new-comer, and make him current coin, better than Lady Joddrell ; and of this Lady Trevor was well aware.

She was writing her acceptance to the invitation in her boudoir after breakfast, when her eldest son lounged in with his cigarette. It was the custom of Sir Richard, in continuation of his foreign habits, to smoke 'all over the place;' and his son was dutiful in following, so far, the paternal example. He had a velveteen suit, with a brilliant scarf-pin, and a watch-chain like a yacht's cable, and looked altogether too town-like; but it could not be denied that he had a very elegant appearance. Dissipation in its early stage has rather a refining effect upon some men, and so it was with Hugh Trevor. His mother looked up at him with admiration mingled with a tender solicitude, as upon some too diligent youth whose health the midnight oil, consumed in studies the object of which was the amelioration of mankind, had somewhat impaired. She held out her disengaged hand to him lovingly, but he took no notice of it.

'I say, mother, if you are writing to Lady Joddrell, please leave me out of your acceptance; I shan't go.'

'Not go, Hugh? what *do* you mean?' Surprise, distress, and even anger were mingled in her tone. It was for his sake that she was going. Not only was it an opportunity of making him known to everybody, but she had already vague schemes of an alliance for him with one of the Joddrell girls, which would help to establish his position.

'Just what I say, and nothing less. We have asked the Thornes for that very day, as you know; and it's a shame, and what I call snobbish, to put them off because of these people.'

'But the Thornes can come any day, as we were saying at breakfast; and, in fact, your father has decided the matter. The Thornes cannot come and dine here with you alone.'

'No, but I can dine with the Thornes; there will be plenty of you to go to Catesby without me, and I know I shall be bored to death. If the Thornes were going too, it would be another thing.'

'Well, it's very likely they will be asked, my dear; at all events, I must insist upon your accompanying us. What a slight it would be putting upon Lady Joddrell, and indeed upon the whole party —which is made up for us—if our eldest son were to decline! I cannot say how you distress me by even proposing such a thing.'

'I am sorry for that, mother; but I think you are behaving badly to the Thornes, and I, for my part, shall show them, by stopping at home, that I think as highly of the Vicarage as of Catesby Hall.'

Under any other circumstances Lady Trevor would have found little difficulty in believing that her son was actuated by these chivalric ideas; but the importance of the matter in hand weighed down in this case all efforts at self-deception.

'You are merely put out, Hugh,' she answered gravely, 'because you had promised yourself a flirtation with Clara Thorne, and you cannot make up your mind to forego it.'

'You may attribute to me any motive you like,' was his angry reply, 'as long as you leave me out of your acceptance. Indeed, whether you do or not, I am not going.'

'Hugh, for *my* sake, I entreat you.'

He would have been a churl indeed had he been unmoved by that loving appeal, so eloquently pressed by voice, and hand, and eye, concerning what, after all, involved so small a self-sacrifice on his own part; and he *was* moved—a little way—to exchange his obstinate negation for a querulous questioning.

'What on earth makes you want me to go, mother? *I* am in no need of patronage, I suppose, from this Lord Chief Justice's widow, even though Charles may be. She can put nothing into my pocket.'

'Is it not enough, dear, to say I wish it? Do I ask you to do so many things contrary to your inclinations just to please me?'

'But this is so unreasonable,' he argued sullenly. 'Come, now; let us make a compromise. If you will get the Thornes asked to Catesby, then I will go too, though I have said I wouldn't.'

'How can I get the Thornes asked to Catesby?'

'Oh, you can if you will. You can do anything you please, when you have a mind for it, with father or anyone else.'

An unpleasant smile accompanied his words. He was absolutely reproaching her—the ungrateful hound!—with duplicities which she had practised again and again for his sake upon her husband.

'You think me much cleverer than I am, Hugh,' she said, with a sickly smile; 'the only way will be to write to Lady Joddrell to say we have asked the Thornes for the very day she has fixed upon, and being such new neighbours, we hardly like to put them off, though they were to be our only guests. Then, perhaps, sooner than lose us, she will ask the Thornes also.'

'Of course she will. There, you see, that's all arranged; and what a fuss you have made all about nothing! I suppose you could not ask that the Thornes and ourselves should be placed together at the dinner-table? There, there, I don't press it; only don't say that I always insist upon having my own way.' Then off he strolled with the injured air of one who has conferred a favour against the grain, or has sacrificed some vital principle to human weakness.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN INVITATION.

On the morning after Lady Trevor had written her diplomatic note to her would-be hostess, there arrived at the Vicarage a social portent in the shape of a smart, cockaded groom, the bearer of a despatch to Mrs. Thorne. It was not a three-

cornered affair, such as ladies deftly fold and entrust to their Mercuries when in a hurry, nor yet the formal square that denotes the presence of an invitation-card; but an envelope with enclosures. The family had hardly finished breakfast, but appetite, as regards the female part of it, was swallowed up at once by the Aaron's rod of curiosity.

'What can it be about, I wonder,' said Mrs. Thorne, weighing the missive in her hand, and examining the well-known crest with elaborate interest, 'that Lady Joddrell should send it by special messenger?'

'Who is also waiting for a reply,' remarked the Vicar drily, as he chipped at his last egg.

To this no attention was paid; sensations were not so frequent at Mirbridge—though of late there had been rather a glut of them—that they should be hurried over; it would have been like getting rid of a holiday as soon as possible, in order to begin work again. Men are generally spendthrifts of their pleasures; whereas women, because, perhaps, they have less of them, delight in prolonging them by anticipation.

'It can't be an invitation,' observed Lucy, 'because it is neither March nor September, and we are only asked to Catesby once every six months.'

The envelope contained three enclosures: an invitation to dinner for the whole party, dated two days back; the note which Lady Trevor had written to Lady Joddrell; and a letter from the latter to the Vicar's wife.

'My dear Mrs. Thorne,

'As ill-luck would have it, the enclosed card, as you see *dated* the day before yesterday, was not posted to you, as it should have been, along with a similar invitation to the Trevors. If it had been so, I do not doubt that you and they would have arranged matters between you so as not to spoil my little dinner-party; and I hope it is not too late to ask you to do so now. My fate, as you will gather from Lady Trevor's note, is in your hands.

'Yours very faithfully,

'Adela Joddrell.'

The enclosure referred to ran as follows:

'Dear Lady Joddrell,

'It is ever so much too good of you to ask so many of us to your dinner-party. We should nevertheless have taken advantage of your hospitality without scruple, and I need not say with much pleasure, but, unfortunately, the Trevors are engaged to dine with us on the very same day; there is no one else coming, and if we were not such new neighbours (though we already *feel* like old friends towards them, and like them immensely) we

should not have scrupled to put them off; but as matters stand you will perceive that this could hardly be done. I can only hope, therefore, that you will, at some later date, dear Lady Joddrell, *give us another chance.*

'Yours most truly,
'NANETTE TREVOR.'

Mrs. Thorne, having read both these communications aloud, observed in a triumphant tone, 'What do you think of *that*, Percy?'

'It seems to me,' returned the Vicar tranquilly, 'that there will be something to read in the county paper at last to-morrow, under some such heading as "Two Ladies of Title Gone Mad."'

'I really don't see any madness in the matter,' returned Mrs. Thorne; 'it is very complimentary, of course, that they should both be so desirous of our presence; but the girls are certainly attractive, and I don't suppose anyone in Derbyshire has greater powers of conversation than yourself.'

'Granted all that, my dear, and also that my wife would be an ornament to any dinner-party; but, so far as I know, we have had no opportunity offered us of shining in that particular sphere.'

'Well, yes,' answered the lady hesitatingly, 'there was, I remember, something said about our dining with the Trevors on the 16th. It was not a formal engagement; but it is Clara's birthday, you know, and Lady Trevor was so good as to say that she hoped we would all come and keep it at the Court. I ought to have told you of it, no doubt; but the fact is, our young folks are always dining there, so that it did not strike me as being of importance, and it slipped my memory."

'I think you might have told me, nevertheless,' said the Vicar gravely. He was just a little annoyed that he had not been informed of the matter; though, indeed, his wife's explanation of it was simple enough. His nature was reflective rather than observant, and he did not take much notice of what ladies call the 'little things,' which have often great significance. It was rather a surprise to him now to call to mind how very intimate his young folk of late had become with the Trevor family; but this proposed keeping of his daughter's birthday at the Court brought the fact home to him very forcibly. It could not be said that he was distressed by the idea, which now for the first time occurred to him, that Clara had particular attractions for Hugh Trevor; but he was far from being pleased with it. He was much too wise as well as good a man to believe that his daughter could find happiness in mere wealth and position; and from what he had seen of him and also heard—for village gossip is fleet of wing—he did not approve of the

young man. Still, he was not blind to the advantages such a connection would offer, and was inclined to regard the Squire's son with a lenience he would certainly not have extended to everybody.

'I can't say how sorry I am, Percy,' said his wife remorsefully. 'I had no idea such a matter would even interest you.'

This was an unfortunate remark, for it hit the very centre of the Rector's conscience, who was severely reproaching himself for the manner in which he had allowed things to take their course.

'It was not dear mamma's fault half as much as ours, papa,' said Lucy, with a glance at Clara, who had risen and was gazing out of the window at the pouring rain, as though the conversation did not concern her. 'She had other things to occupy her; but we girls have been looking forward to the 16th with great excitement.'

'I beg you will not speak for me, Lucy,' said Clara coldly, and without even turning her head. 'I have not been excited in the least.'

'Well, at least you will allow you were pleased that Lady Trevor should have wished to make a little *fête* day, as it were, of your birthday.'

'It was certainly very kind of her,' observed Mrs. Thorne. 'I am sure the way in which she speaks of us all in her letter to Lady Joddrell is most gratifying.'

'And how nice and kind of Lady Joddrell,' remarked Lucy, 'to enclose her letter. Some people in her position would have felt a little jealous.'

'You little goose!' cried Clara contemptuously; 'don't you see that it was the only way she could secure the Trevors?'

'At all events, she had intended to ask us from the first, only she forgot to post the invitation.'

Clara laughed aloud.

'Come—come, let us be charitable,' said the Rector.

'You are quite right to put it upon that ground,' replied Clara scornfully. 'Charity believeth all things, otherwise I don't think it is possible to believe that Lady Joddrell had the remotest intention of asking us to dinner.'

'But what are we to do about it?' said Mrs. Thorne, by no means desirous of arguing a doubtful cause against so redoubtable an antagonist. 'I suppose we must keep the groom till I have seen Lady Trevor and ascertained her views on the matter.'

'Clara and I have promised to go up to the Court, mother, this morning, in case it rained,' remarked Lucy, 'to play a game at billiards. I suppose we could not save you the trouble?'

'Certainly not, my dear,' answered Mrs. Thorne. 'That

would be treating Lady Trevor with disrespect, which I am sure she does not deserve at our hands.'

'She is certainly as kind as can be to us girls,' assented Lucy

'And, indeed, to everybody,' added Mrs. Thorne. 'The interest she takes in the village folk is beyond all praise. It is not a case of "one has only to ask," as some clergymen, who think themselves exceptionally fortunate, say of their squires, for there really is no need to ask. She seems to find out the poor people's wants by instinct. Then the way in which she has already made herself acquainted with the parish is quite marvellous. She gave her directions to the coachman about getting to Barlow's Barn yesterday, which is really a very out-of-the-way place, as though she had been Mirbridge-born. Moreover, she takes no credit to herself for the pains she must put herself to in order to become so accurate, and was quite distressed when I complimented her about it. She says, Sir Richard had a map of Mirbridge with him at Minard, and used to delight in pointing out to her all the places with which he had been associated.'

'And now he's got back to them,' observed Clara drily, 'he doesn't care twopence about any one of them.'

'That is certainly true,' admitted the Rector, 'It is very difficult to rouse him about anything of local interest. Even in the matter of our new church-tower—a third of the expense of which comes out of his own pocket—I have found his attention languid. It is fair to say, however, that much of his indifference may be the result of ill-health.'

'Do you think poor Sir Richard is really ill, papa?' inquired Lucy sympathetically.

'I do. And if we asked Dr. Wood—and it was consistent with his duty to reply to such a question—I am much mistaken if he would not say seriously ill.'

'I think Lady Trevor has her suspicions that that is the case,' observed Mrs. Thorne. 'Though not demonstrative, she is, I am sure, most tenderly attached to her husband. What especially touches me is the respect she pays to the memory of his mother.'

'It is very seldom that one finds a woman devoted to the shrine of her mother-in-law,' observed Clara.

'Let us hope you will be an exception, my dear,' remarked the Rector slily.

'I am afraid I shall disappoint you in that respect, papa,' answered Clara coldly.

'Well, I suppose your relations with her will depend upon what sort of a person she turns out to be. Lady Trevor, by all accounts, was very fortunate in this respect.'

'It is quite curious, Mrs. Grange tells me,' said Mrs. Thorne,

'how she studies to carry on things at the Court precisely as they were managed by her predecessor; and Cadman tells us that this is done so accurately, that he could almost think his old mistress were alive. She must, I suppose, get her information from her husband.'

'Then how is it,' observed Clara, 'that you say he takes no interest in local details?'

'I conclude home matters are different with him,' said the Rector; 'at all events, as regards their association with his mother. It was only the other day that Lady Trevor was pointing out to me from the tennis-ground what used to be the old lady's favourite seat on the terrace. "There she would sit for hours," she said, "gazing at the old church in its mantle of ivy, which you have improved off the face of the earth."

'"But, my dear Lady Trevor," said I, "we cannot *see* the church from that part of the terrace at all."

'"I dare say not," she answered, smiling, "but I am speaking of years ago, when, my husband tells me, not one of those trees on Highbury Common, which now shut out the view, was even planted." So that she really knew more about it, though, of course, at second-hand, than I did myself.'

'I can testify to the truth of that myself,' observed Mrs. Thorne; 'for when poor old Mrs. Godfrey, at the Inn, got into trouble the other day, and I was at my wits' end for an excuse for her—a thing, indeed, difficult to find for a drunken woman—Lady Trevor found one in a most unlooked-for quarter. "We who are mothers should recollect," she said, "that the poor old creature has never got over her son's terrible end, though it was so many years ago."

'"What was that?" I said.

'"Oh, did you never hear of it?" she replied. "You must get Sir Richard to tell it you as he told it to me; he has a good deal of dramatic form in narrative. Young Godfrey was returning home from hunting, after a hard day, during which he had refreshed himself, and his poor horse had not; and, in his drunken obstinacy, he spurred the animal to leap the horse-trough in front of the Inn, and it came down with him, and he broke his neck at his mother's feet!"

'It seemed singular enough that Lady Trevor should be telling me a story which I had never heard even from one of our old parishioners. I never saw anyone in her position so resolved to make herself acquainted with the affairs of those around her.'

'I have often noticed that,' observed the Rector; 'but what is so rare is the good use she makes of her information; she is not a mere gossip, like some great ladies I could name. She only instanced Mrs. Godfrey's misfortune, you see, to palliate her wrong-doing.'

'Just so,' assented Mrs. Thorne; 'and there was another observation she made which impressed me still more with her tenderness of heart. I could not help saying that the death of a young man who was a drunkard and also cruel to animals was not perhaps an accident altogether to be deplored; to which she replied gravely, "But this poor woman was his mother, and probably made a very different picture of him in her mind than that which was presented to other people."'

'Poor woman!' ejaculated the Rector, with a sigh.

'I am afraid Mrs. Godfrey is not a very deserving object of sympathy,' remarked Mrs. Thorne.

'I was not thinking of Mrs. Godfrey at all, my dear,' was the grave rejoinder; and the Rector's eye wandered unconsciously towards his elder daughter, who was still regarding the prospect without with rapt attention, as though she were calculating the rainfalls. Notwithstanding that she had seemed to pay so little heed to the conversation, not a syllable of it had escaped her ears.

'Well, girls, if you are coming with me to the Court,' observed Mrs. Thorne, after an uncomfortable pause, 'you had better put on your waterproofs.'

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAND AGENT.

To UNLEARN, as many of us have come to know, is far more difficult than to learn; and Lady Trevor had often reason to regret that 'there is no such thing as forgetting.' In matters of seeming importance, and for which she was prepared beforehand, she felt herself comparatively secure; but in little things she was only too conscious that she was constantly tripping. She could only hope that they were too insignificant to attract attention, though to her own startled view, as soon as she saw her error, it seemed to her that every false step must be fatal. She had not to know so many things that were as familiar to her as his staff to a blind man, or, rather, to a man who pretended to be blind, and could see as well as feel it. There was a danger even in her walking about the parish and omitting to ask her way! On the other hand, every hour lessened her peril, since it presupposed, or at least rendered more natural, her acquaintance with people, places, and things.

The impression she had produced in general was similar to that she had made upon the family at the Rectory—namely, that her nature was wonderfully adaptive, that she did her very best to fit herself for her novel position, and, for a foreigner, succeeded in it marvellously well. She was exceedingly popular, which, indeed, she deserved to be; but, from the nature of the case, the least so with those who should have known her best,

for with them it was necessary to be guarded, and repress all advances of familiarity. It was as natural to Lady Trevor as it had been to Letty Beeton of old to be gentle and courteous to everyone ; the most difficult part of the *rôle* she had to play was to give herself the airs of a great lady to her inferiors, which it was sometimes necessary to do, as, for instance, in the case of Cadman, the butler. There had been a time when she had stood in some awe of him as the trusted servant of old Sir Marmaduke, who, perhaps, had had his suspicions of his young master's goings-on with her ladyship's *protégée*, the schoolmistress, and she had always a feeling of discomfort when he was behind her chair. There were pauses when he was not handing the dishes and helping the wine, which he might be utilizing perhaps in reflection—he looked grave enough for anything—and her very propinquity might suggest to him some association of ideas.

To him she was consistently haughty and dignified, so that he even complained to Mrs. Grange that 'Since my lady was so bent upon having things as they used to be in the old days, it was a pity she seemed to think so much of herself, as his old mistress had never done. *She* was never short with him, Heaven bless her! nor thought herself of different flesh and blood to those who served her.'

To this the housekeeper rejoined that, for her own part, she had noticed nothing of that, though, even if it were so, it was not so much to be wondered at, considering what, by all accounts, had happened in the family through the late Lady Trevor's 'making too much of those below her in station.'

'Then you think she *knows*, do you?' said the butler, forgetting his indignation in a topic which had once been the great sensation of his professional existence, and which had still its attraction for him.

'Well, of course,' returned the housekeeper, with some contempt. 'Do you suppose Sir Richard would ever have brought her here without making a clean breast of it, and leaving his peccadilloes to be told her by other people?'

'I should not like to be the party as told her,' observed Mr. Cadman grimly.

'Very likely not. But there's many of her own sex in her own rank of life as would enjoy it, of that you may depend,' said the housekeeper shrewdly. 'A little scandal about other people is welcome enough to most of us ; but something as tells against the very woman as we are talking to—when we can speak about it without fear of her pulling the cap off one's head—is the most goluptious talk of all.'

'Then you think, maybe, she will hear of it at Lady Joddrell's, where they're all going to dinner the week after next, I am glad to say?'

'I should think it almost certain,' said Mrs. Grange confidently; 'especially if that sharp-tongued Mrs. Westrop is to be one of the company.'

'Really now, you don't say so,' said Mr. Cadman, rubbing his hands together as though they contained a silver spoon and plate-leather. 'Well, I was thinking how pleasant it would be to have no cloth to lay, and the evening to myself; but hanged if I wouldn't rather be going with them to Catesby Hall, on the chance of it coming off while I was by. I have heard things when handing the cake, in my time, as have been enough to make a man drop his tray.'

The gardener was another person whom, as having known Letty Beeton in old days, and had many a dispute with her about grapes and peaches (which he had her mistress's word for it were fit for eating, whereas it was his custom to keep them on wall and trellis till they dropped off of themselves), Lady Trevor was wont to keep at arm's length. He had been in the service of the Trevors for nearly fifty years, and would talk of them, even to her, in a dreadfully familiar fashion. Being an outdoor servant, his previous knowledge of her had been limited; but he would now and then shoot such glances at her from under his shaggy eyebrows as made her blood run cold; they simply came from solicitude about his fruit, which the sight of his mistress naturally awakened, for he grudged it to the Court folk as much as ever, but to her eyes it seemed like the low beginnings of suspicion—some stirring of the sluggish waves of memory.

Save these two serving-men, there was not a menial at the Court who would not have spoken of the mistress as very kind and free in her manners to them, and their testimony would have been corroborated by nine out of ten of the villagers.

There was one man, however, who had so little association with her past that she did not fear him, but to whom, nevertheless, she could not bring herself to behave with her usual kindness and condescension. This was Robert Morris, Sir Richard's land agent. He had displeased her, as we know, at their first meeting in the Four Acre, and had certainly given himself no trouble to do away with the unfavourable impression he had produced upon her. His nature was a very masterful one, and having had the undisturbed control of Sir Richard's affairs for a quarter of a century, he exceedingly resented any inquiry into them. Nothing, indeed, of a formal nature had been attempted in the matter; but Sir Richard had announced his intention of 'looking into things' and taking them more or less into his own hands. With this view, Mr. Morris had been requested to furnish his employers with certain documents and records, and though he had not declined to do so, he had preferred to bring

them in person to the Court, a course which had not been considered satisfactory. Sir Richard had objected to it, because it necessitated his personal attention to the matter, and the hearing of his Agent's explanations, which had no sort of interest for him whatever.

Business of all kinds was hateful to him. He was one of those men, by no means so rare as may be imagined, who would prefer to be cheated out of ten per cent. of their income, rather than be troubled with investigations as to its loss. Lady Trevor had objected to the Agent's course of proceeding because it precluded any independent examination into the facts, which, she had a shrewd suspicion, would be misrepresented. There had been plenty of persons in the parish to complain of Mr. Morris' method of administering her husband's affairs, and one or two who had openly accused him of malpractices. She was not one, in any case, to sit down under a wrong because the remedy might cause her inconvenience and annoyance, and there were special reasons, we are aware, why it behoved her to see that the estate was duly managed, that there should be as large a margin as possible of income over expenditure.

Though she never lost sight of her peculiar peril even for one hour, she had thoughts and cares for other things. If it were not so—if anyone with a shameful secret in their breast should be always taking it out and looking at it, as for a brief space we gaze upon the locket that contains the likeness of our departed one—there would be more mad people than our asylums could accommodate. The target of existence has its circle round the bull's-eye, and life went on with Lady Trevor outside the one central and absorbing point of interest as it went on with others.

In a general way this was beneficial to her, of course ; since while she was engaged in other matters she forgot her burthen ; but the nature of her transactions with Mr. Morris increased that gentleman's enmity, and, as she was well aware, she could not afford to make enemies. He was much too astute not to recognise from the first that it was my lady's finger that was pointing out the road which Sir Richard had taken. The Baronet, indeed, had received him very civilly on his arrival with the required documents—but he was not alone ; in a corner of the library, where the interview had taken place, Lady Trevor was sitting, with a pretence of being engaged in needlework which did not deceive the visitor. They were not a newly-married couple, who could not bear to be out of one another's sight, even on an occasion which concerned the husband only.

'I am sorry you should have given yourself the trouble to come over in person, Mr. Morris,' said Sir Richard good-naturedly.

'To send you all these papers without coming to explain

them, sir, would be like sending them to you in a box without the key,' was the Agent's reply.

He had brought them in a huge bag, and was proceeding to lay them upon the table, when Lady Trevor looked up quietly, and observed :

'I don't think it will be necessary to take them out, Mr. Morris.'

'I don't understand you, my lady.'

'I thought Sir Richard had made it plain to you that he wished them to be left here for investigation at his leisure.'

'Pardon me, madam, but your husband is not a man of business, and unless he has some one to go over the figures with him, they will be unintelligible to him.'

'By gad, that's very true!' exclaimed Sir Richard. 'My head goes round at the very sight of them.'

'But surely I am the proper person,' insisted the Agent, 'unless, indeed, you have reason to suppose that I have abused my trust——'

'Not at all, not at all,' interrupted Sir Richard, with an uncomfortable laugh ; 'what is wanted is a little overhauling of the domestic accounts. They seem to us in excess of what we had expected in one or two particulars ; and we wish to compare them with similar items of expenditure in my father's time—that is it, is it not, my dear?' he concluded, looking towards his wife.

'That is all—for the present,' said Lady Trevor.

The Agent's face grew very red, as it was wont to do at the least cross, and it was only with a great effort that he restrained his ire.

'Then am I to understand that every petty detail of these transactions, which extend over a quarter of a century, in connection with the Court and its belongings, is to be placed in the hands of a stranger to be audited?'

'Nothing of the kind—pooh, pooh!' broke in Sir Richard, already weary of the whole subject. 'This is no question of strangers ; the auditor, if you must know, will be Lady Trevor herself. You won't object to her, I suppose? You didn't think she was such a hand at figures, perhaps? Well, she is!'

'I was certainly not aware of her ladyship's accomplishments in that way,' returned the Agent drily. Though greatly affronted by the proposal, it was a relief to him to find that the investigation was to be after all of an amateurish kind ; it was a great insult to him to suggest anything of the sort, but it was better, at all events, than having a lawyer to poke and pry into his accounts, a proceeding which would have been inconvenient to him indeed, and possibly even disastrous.

On the other hand, it seemed to him in the last degree strange

that Lady Trevor, 'half a Frenchwoman,' as the neighbours called her, though, indeed, it was difficult to understand the process by which they arrived at that conclusion, since she must have been either whole French or whole English—should have a turn for arithmetic and the keeping of accounts. Mr. Morris's view of a Frenchwoman was a combination of ideas derived from the ballet, the Divorce Court, and the principal plate in a stray number of the *Magasin des Modes*, which a spinster aunt of his once purchased at a London bookstall.

A certain sentiment of curiosity to know what 'the woman' would do with his bills and vouchers when she got them mingled with his ire. There was no alternative for him but to leave them with her; but if he could get any hint as to her intended proceedings, he felt it would be some relief to him. It was only too certain that she was one of those cattle which might 'be led, but not drove,' and, alas! he had for many years been only accustomed to driving.

'Is there any particular matter which your ladyship has in your mind, or to which you would wish to draw my attention?'

'Well, since you have put that question, Mr. Morris,' she replied, in a more conciliatory tone, 'it would be uncivil—and perhaps even underhand—to conceal from you that there are two items in your charge for repairs——'

'Items!' ejaculated Sir Richard in a tone of irritation; 'you don't mean to say that you are going into items? You know I particularly stipulated, Nannie, that I should be spared all disquieting details. I'm not well, Morris, and that's the fact,' he added apologetically, 'or what you have to say about all these things would be deeply interesting to me, of course.'

'Still, Sir Richard, having said so much,' observed Lady Trevor, 'I think it due to Mr. Morris that I should say a little more. The matter will not take five minutes.'

'My dear, you talk like the dentist,' interrupted Sir Richard, laughing. 'I know you are going on to say that the operation will be almost painless; but it will not be painless to *me*.'

'Then perhaps Mr. Morris will be so good as to step into the next room with me,' said Lady Trevor, rising.

'A capital notion,' cried Sir Richard; 'I'll look in upon you as soon as I have finished my cigar.'

With a little frown, as of disappointment at being deserted by her natural protector—which was really a cunning touch of art, for the whole proceeding had been chalked out by her beforehand—Lady Trevor led the way, while the Agent followed her with his bag.

The apartment in which he found himself was, as he well remembered, used by the late Lady Trevor for transacting her domestic affairs, and had been selected especially as communicating with her

husband's favourite room during her latter days. It had been refurnished, by Sir Richard's orders, in the same simple fashion as of yore ; but the little safe, let into the wall, in which his mother was wont to keep her household bills and memoranda, stood in its old place.

Lady Trevor seated herself at the plain oak table, and motioned her companion to a chair.

It were difficult to imagine a greater contrast than the two presented : the woman, the very type of gracefulness and mature beauty, with a touch of scorn upon her lip, unconsciously evoked by the presence of her companion ; the man, wary and sagacious as an elephant, with an air of swaggering independence that sat ill upon him, and, ever and anon, when her attention was otherwise engaged, regarding her from under the pent-house of his brows with keen disfavour.

'This reminds me of old times,' said the Agent, still in a conciliatory voice, and looking curiously about him. 'Your mother-in-law often did me the honour to consult me, in this very room, about various household expenses, in which, like Sir Richard, the late baronet took but little interest. I suppose that old safe yonder has not been opened for a quarter of a century ?'

'You are mistaken there,' she answered drily. 'The safe has been opened by Sir Richard, and his finding in it certain accounts has been one of the causes which have induced—nay, I may say, compelled—him to trouble you with this investigation. For example, there are the estimates for the repairs of the Lodge and the fowl-house. In that bag, I conclude, you have the bills for precisely the same work. The sum charged in them I happen to know ; but it will be a more frank and open course to compare with you the two accounts.'

'There can be no objection to that, of course, madam ; but you must consider, in these and similar cases, the price of labour has immensely increased during the last quarter of a century, and this, of course, involves longer bills.'

'That is not quite the case, I think, Mr. Morris ; for, although wages have considerably increased, the comparative cheapness of material has more than compensated for it.'

'I did not know that political economy was studied by ladies in France,' he answered, in what was intended to be a tone of sarcasm, but was, in truth, only clumsily offensive, like a thrust with a rapier delivered by one accustomed to use a cudgel ; but, nevertheless, it had its effect. The bunch of keys that his companion held trembled in her hand. Fortunately, he took for rage what was in reality another emotion. There was something in his words, and in the keen glances that had accompanied them, which made her sick and faint. 'I am aware that I am not very respectful,' he continued, sullenly apologetic ; 'but it is hard,

after forty years of devotion to the Trevor family, to be accused of cooking their accounts! I am no cheat, madam.'

'I have made no such charge, Mr. Morris,' she answered quietly. 'Instead of applying ill names to yourself, which nobody else has used, suppose we go into the facts. If you will take out the old accounts of which I spoke, I will get their counterparts out of the safe.'

With that she rose, and, selecting a key from the rest, placed it in the safe-door, and, with a deft turn of her hand, unlocked it. He gazed at her with an amazement that almost amounted to stupefaction. It struck her for a moment that, paralyzed by the sense of his guilt, the Agent might be about to confess all and throw himself upon her mercy.

'This has been rehearsed many times,' he suddenly broke out; 'I could not have thought Sir Richard capable of it.'

'What *do* you mean, Mr. Morris? Once, and once only, my husband, as I have said, took out these documents and then replaced them. I have never touched them!'

'Nor tried to touch them?'

'Certainly not. I do not understand you. Having once seen them, I knew that they were there, and here they are. The bills for the fowl-house and for Mrs. Waite's cottage.'

'For Mrs. Waite's cottage?' repeated the Agent, like one in a dream. 'It doesn't say so in the bill, I notice.'

'Why should it? It is designated the Lodge; but Mrs. Waite lived there then, I conclude, as she lives there now. For the same repairs, you perceive, for which fifty pounds were paid on the last occasion, you have charged no less than a hundred and twenty.'

'There is something wrong,' muttered the Agent, passing his hand over his great forehead, and staring stolidly at his companion.

'I am afraid so,' she answered coldly. 'And remember these are comparatively small matters. Now supposing that everything else during your stewardship has been charged for in the like proportion as the fowl-house——'

'And Mrs. Waite's cottage,' put in the Agent.

'Well, of course; I am speaking of those two accounts. I say in that case you will have received—improperly—thousands of pounds.'

As she said this, she laid her hand impressively upon the table, and looked him straight in the face.

To her astonishment he returned her gaze with the same intensity, but answered nothing; she had expected an outburst.

'The question now is, Mr. Morris, what course are you going to adopt?'

'Yes, indeed.'

Though evidently much perturbed in mind, he seemed unable to grasp the situation. So serious a charge had, perhaps, deprived him of his senses. His resentment was visible enough, for his face was scarlet ; but somehow his indignation appeared to be only skin-deep. There was something else in his thoughts which overlay it.

'It seems to me, Mr. Morris, that there is only one course open to you,' she continued, 'but of that you are the best judge.'

'I should like to have a little time,' he murmured, breathing hard.

'Do you mean to prepare your defence ? That's fair enough ; but it is taking for granted that Sir Richard intends to prosecute you. He is disinclined, I know, to adopt that course. He does not wish for any exposure.'

'Ah, the very thing I expected !' he exclaimed triumphantly. '"Let sleeping dogs lie" is an excellent proverb.'

'It does not, however, apply to watch-dogs who betray their master !' she answered with indignation. 'If you imagine that Sir Richard is afraid of anything you may say or do, you are mistaken, Mr. Morris. It is for your sake, not his own, if he hesitates to employ the law against you. If you can clear yourself, that is another matter, but otherwise there must be restitution. On that, at least, I am resolved. Take time, by all means, if you need time ; but it is but fair to warn you that I know a good deal more of your proceedings than you imagine.'

'And not only of *my* proceedings. Just a word in your ear.' He stood up, leaning on the table with his fingers, and whispered across it in a harsh and hissing tone : '*For a Frenchwoman who has never been at Mirbridge before, you know too much, my Lady Trevor.*'

CHAPTER XXI.

THE UNJUST STEWARD.

LADY TREVOR was a resolute woman ; having once put her hand to the plough, no matter how stubborn the soil, she was not one to look back. If right had been upon her side, she would have been a martyr, rather than have succumbed to anyone. But in the matter in which it was but too plain the land agent was so evidently rejoicing, unhappily, the right was not with her. If she had been less conscientious, or more desperate, she would have shown a bolder front to him, but she had no firm ground to stand upon. Moreover, the unexpectedness of the attack—for she had feared no danger from this quarter—and her ignorance of how she had brought it upon herself, threw her into a species of panic.

'Are you mad, Mr. Morris ?' she cried, with a pretence of

vehement indignation; but in truth she felt that her wits were leaving her—of which, if she lost command for a moment, she knew that all was lost indeed.

'I am not mad, my lady, nor yet drunk,' was the coarse reply, 'but can put two and two together, as well as yourself, who are so quick at figures.'

'Then what is it you mean?'

It was a foolish question, and, as she knew directly she had uttered it, one wholly inadequate to the occasion. She ought to have been all indignation and amazement. The proper course—that is, the course that this man would naturally expect of her—was to go to her husband on the instant, and complain of the impertinence to which she had been subjected. But, incapable as she felt of defending herself, to make Sir Richard a party to the quarrel would have been worse than futile. He would have kicked the man out of doors and 'have done with it,' as he would have himself expressed it, though such a proceeding would have been the beginning of ruin.

'What do I mean, my lady?' repeated the Agent sullenly. 'Well, that's a question that you can answer better than I can, because I have only got hold of the first thread of the skein; but you may take it for granted that I mean to unravel the whole of it. I only know at present that there's something wrong about you.'

She smiled contemptuously, wondering the while what was working in the other's mind, without the knowledge of which she felt that she was fighting the air. Her silence, while it strengthened his growing suspicion, betrayed her thoughts.

'You want me to show my hand, madam; but there is plenty of time for that. Indeed, I don't know what cards I have in it myself, just yet.'

'That I can easily believe, indeed,' she put in mockingly, as it seemed to him, but in fact almost hysterically; the tension of her nerves was giving way.

'Well, we shall see,' he answered meaningly; 'but let them laugh who win. You were good enough to say that it was but fair I should take a little time for my defence; perhaps it will be for attack instead. Of this I am well-nigh certain, madam, that you are sailing under false colours.'

'That is a matter about which, indeed, you should know something; you have had a long experience of it, Mr. Morris.'

A dusky red overspread the Agent's face, and his huge frame trembled with passion. It is a mistake to suppose that the innocent have the monopoly of what we call an honest indignation; a long course of successful villainy, especially if the wrongdoer has been accustomed to lord it over his betters, breeds a similar sensitiveness to imputation. His companion noted his rising

wrath with pleasure; if he would only lose his temper, and throw down his cards!

'Oh, you brave English!' she cried, accentuating by design the slightly foreign pronunciation she always affected, 'when you *are* cheats, what cheats you are!'

'Cheats!' cried the Agent, transported with passion, 'you are a pretty one to talk of cheating. Why, you are a cheat yourself, and English too! I have watched you, and so have others I could name'—this last was a happy thought. So far as the speaker knew, it was not true, but he threw in the falsehood at haphazard, as a reckless cook might throw in some preserve or condiment into the dish she was preparing, which, as it happens, turns out to be its chief attraction—'and we have found out at least this much, that you are playing some trick upon us; Mirbridge folk may not be so sharp as you, but they are not moles.'

Lady Trevor laughed aloud; it was easier to do so than to make any articulate reply; he did not notice the false ring of it, and her ridicule aroused his ire.

'Yes,' he exclaimed, 'you have been here before.'

'Indeed! now I wonder how you found that out—you who are not a mole, but a weasel.'

'Well, for one thing, because no one who did not know the trick of it could have opened yonder safe. It did not take you a second, though it would have taken me five minutes, perhaps; there is no one in the house but your husband—if he *is* your husband—who could have done the like.'

'I see. Then it never struck you that, the safe having been placed in my care, my husband—if, as you say, he *is* my husband, which is really a most humorous touch, and does your country wit great credit—should have taught me how to open it.'

'Ah! but you said just now,' returned the other one cunningly, 'that it had been opened only once, and that by Sir Richard—a most unfortunate admission for you. You may tell me, of course, that you were lying; but if one lies in one thing, one may lie in another.'

'Another leaf from the book of your experience,' she answered contemptuously.

'Yes, yes; you are not going to put me off the scent by the rancour of your speech, madam!' he answered vehemently. 'Your face is more truthful than your tongue, and I can *see* that I am right. You stand in fear of me, Lady Trevor.'

It was true enough; but he was not sure of it, nor was she sure of any step she took, though she should put her foot down ever so firmly. They were playing a game of brag together, and for high stakes.

'Afraid of *you*, the unjust steward, the oppressor of the poor—the villain who uses his kind master's name to cover his own

rapacity! An insolent cur that bites the hand that feeds him. Since you talk of what others say, let me tell you *that*, sir!'

'Still, I notice that you don't go into the other room, and make your appeal to Sir Richard,' he answered cunningly. 'There is something in that, too, that requires explanation, don't you think?'

'To you, who have no more heart than conscience, it may be so. You know that your master is ill—and perhaps dying; that he has been worried; that any excitement may be fatal to him; and yet you express surprise that I do not run the risk of injuring him, because a worthless fellow, for whom the gaol gapes, and whose words I make no more account of than the idle wind, has dared to be impertinent to me.'

'Impertinent! Nay, madam, what I have said to you is pertinent enough. You tell me something of your own accord—which you had rather have bitten your tongue out than have spoken, now that it is too late—and then you find that it does not square with what you do. It is a small thing for any lady to know the trick of a lock; but it is the little straws which show the way the wind blows. I say again, you are not what you profess to be.'

'You will find, I think, that that will not be evidence,' she answered coldly, 'or tell much in your favour if it is, when you come to be tried at the Assizes. You know best what will be urged against you; but, at all events, I have laid my finger on two blots—mere specks, no doubt—in your dark career of fraud.'

He held up his hand with the air of one who seeks for information, and exclaimed, 'One moment, my lady; what blots?'

'I am referring to these two accounts. Two straws which, as you say, show how the wind is blowing. Your monstrous over-charges in respect to the fowl-house and Mrs. Waite's cottage.'

'She has said it again,' continued the other triumphantly. 'Three times has she let the cat out of the bag! Why, there has been no Mrs. Waite these twenty years! There is no mention of her in the account at all! How came you to speak of her by name, as if you had known her a generation ago, before she married her second husband, Gayton? Tell me *that*, my lady!'

For the moment 'my lady' could answer nothing. The thought of the indiscretion she had committed overwhelmed her with confusion. It was, indeed, a small thing, but, as it had proved itself to be, full of the most fatal significance. Thus it was, she had remembered to have read, in the cases of far greater wrongdoers. With whatever solicitude they conceal the evidences of their crime, there is always an unconsidered chink in the armour of their prudence. They cannot be for

ever pacing like sentinels before the gate of their misdeeds to turn back all intruders. Though they keep their finger upon their very lips, it does not prevent a slip of the tongue. Of course, she ought to have remembered that Mrs. Waite, whose name had once been very naturally a household word to her, for she had kept the Lodge-gates when she herself had been a school-girl, and had seen her pass through them every day, had lost her husband and married again; but this fact she had forgotten to pigeon-hole in her recollection. It was so natural to her to say 'Mrs. Waite' that it never even occurred to her to correct herself; as the land agent had reminded her, she had used the name three times, and but for his reference to the fact would doubtless have gone on doing so. Even if she should get out of this particular difficulty, she foresaw that when speaking with this man, his suspicions having once been excited and his interest bound up in their confirmation, there would be a hundred pitfalls for her. It even seemed to her for one despairing moment that it would be better to take him into her confidence than to let him find out the truth for himself. She could make it worth his while to be silent. One instant's consideration, however, stifled the suicidal thought. For even if he was convinced that she was not what she pretended to be, he would be far indeed from guessing who she really was. Her identity was hidden where even this cunning scoundrel would never dream of looking for it—in the grave. On the other hand, to defy him would be very dangerous, for defiance in his case must necessarily involve the invocation of the law—that law which she had not herself as yet transgressed, but which she had the intention of transgressing, and whose searching eyes she had as much cause to fear as he had. That he had robbed Sir Richard right and left, she was convinced, and it was clear that he knew her to be so: if she condoned his crime he would set it down, not to mercy, but to fear, and from that moment she would be in his power, compelled not only to sit down under the wrongs that had been done, but to submit to his future depredations without a murmur. All these considerations passed through her mind in a second, leaving, however, one firm resolve behind them that, come what might, she would never be black-mailed. Rather than be under this man's thumb, it seemed preferable to her to die a thousand deaths. Moreover, if she did die, and he survived her, would not Hugh also be under his thumb?—a thought that stung her into fury.

'You fool!' she cried, with no simulated passion, 'what mare's nest have you discovered? What matters it to me what this woman's name is? I spoke of her as I heard my husband speak of her; I suppose he had forgotten that she had married again.'

The land agent shook his head incredulously. 'No, madam,

that won't do,' he cried; 'Sir Richard has spoken to me of the person in question without falling into the error that has betrayed *you*. I don't deny that if the thing stood alone you might not get out of it that way, but, coupled with the matter of the safe, it is to my mind insurmountable. The fact, therefore, is this, that I, too, have a key to a certain mystery, though I have not yet learnt the trick of the lock. It may take time, but the law, which moves very slowly, will give me time, and is, moreover, itself a picker of locks. It is quite extraordinary what curious things come out in cross-examinations. Some women, supposed to be spotless as the snow, have sometimes, for example, a difficulty in procuring their marriage-lines: you smile—but not, as it seems to me, quite so contemptuously as before—well, that is a shaft I shot at random. It may have gone home or not; only when your ladyship speaks of restitution, you must be prepared for all that happens on the road to it. You will not get one farthing, at least out of my pocket, except by the pressure of the law, which will squeeze out a good many other things, you may rely upon it. A prolonged case, including, as you have hinted, transactions over many years, tried in the county town, where all your neighbours will come and gape to hear it. Gossip and scandal on their tiptoes: the newspapers full of the great Trevor case; you know not (again I quote your own words) what may be urged against you. Your past may be immaculate, though I doubt it; but, whatever it is, you may rely upon it, it shall appear. As to my own danger, one must risk something; it is not, however (for why should I not speak plainly with you?), as if I had put my hands into Sir Richard's pocket, and taken his watch.'

'What is the difference?' she put in quickly.

'Ah! you are speaking of the moral aspect,' he answered, with a sneer; 'such considerations are out of my line. I am a practical man. What I meant you to understand was, that if this were a simple case—let us say, merely as an illustration, of felony—then indeed you might cry "Away with him!"—all other matters would be irrelevant, the judge would refuse to go into them. But your humble servant is not to be got rid of in this fashion. Whatever I may have done is capable of explanation; there will be two opinions about it (if one of them be only that of my counsel); the affair will be gone into from first to last. You will find Robert Morris a hard nut to crack, and your ladyship may break your teeth at it.'

'Then I shall find a shorter way with you,' was the quiet response. 'Heaven is my witness that I would have spared you, but your insolence and brutality have put mercy out of court. Take up your accounts, Mr. Morris; it is the last time that you will have the custody of them, for you are no longer steward.'

'You will find that I am not so easily dismissed,' he answered, with a laugh—which had, however, something of discomfort in it; 'you had better think twice of this.'

She rose to her feet, and pointed to the papers haughtily: 'Put them in the bag, you Judas, and go your way! You flatter yourself that you have become by grafting a finished knave, but there is something still left in you of the original fool. Why could you not content yourself with embezzlement, which, as you say, is comparatively safe? What lust of gain could have induced you to sell the Romney picture?'

'The Romney!' The papers which he had been making a pretence of collecting fell from his hands; his jaw dropped, and the huge mouth, distorted with a malignant grin, became a mere cavern; the perspiration stood upon his brow like mildew.

'I don't know what your ladyship means,' he stammered, his tone grown suddenly slavishly respectful; 'the Romney is in the gallery.'

'A copy. I know where the original is to be found, and the price that was paid for it. This day there will be a warrant issued against you for stealing it, and in forty-eight hours, at furthest, you will be in Derby gaol.'

'You will surely not be so precipitate?' he pleaded. There was a touch of sarcastic defiance even yet in his words; but the tone was abject. Above all, there was no attempt at denial. Her audacity—for in her desperation she had drawn her bow at a venture, trusting solely to Mr. Gurdon's confident assertion—had been crowned with success.

'Why not?' she answered contemptuously. 'Have you shown yourself so deserving of mercy? Well, perhaps, when the sentence is about to be pronounced, Sir Richard may be induced to intercede in mitigation of punishment. It will be for some term of years, I suppose, in any case.'

'What would you have me do?' he murmured hoarsely.

'I suppose,' she said, taking no notice of his question, 'you will wish us to be silent upon the matter of these accounts, which you were just now so eager to go into. I can hardly promise it; indeed, I am not sure whether it would not be compounding a felony.'

He made a movement of sullen impatience.

'To *you*, of course, nothing seems a crime; but, at all events, on your part, there must, at least, be restitution.'

'Restitution! I have not ten pounds that I can call my own.'

'Then where are our thousands?'

'Gone! Lost in speculation! Great heavens, do you suppose I would have——' He hesitated.

'Sold the picture, you were going to say,' she put in drily

She was not a cruel woman; but she felt a certain pleasure in the spectacle of this man's abasement—in the command she

had recovered of herself, as well as gained over him. She had tasted of the bitterness of death; and now she revelled in one of 'the wild joys of living' hitherto unknown to her—'sweet revenge' on the man who had held the cup to her lips and so relentlessly pressed it on her.

'Yes. I was pressed for ready money,' he admitted sullenly.

'Well, take up those things and go. Your presence is hateful to me.'

'Then you mean to ruin me?'

'You *are* ruined, it seems. It is merely a question of your punishment.'

'Does Sir Richard know?' he inquired hoarsely.

'Not yet. Other people know, if you are thinking of murdering me.' His face had indeed an ugly look; but it passed away, and left it only slavish. 'It is, of course, my duty to tell him. It will agitate him very much. That is the sole consideration, you will understand, that will weigh with me in this matter.'

He nodded his huge head assentingly; he understood her very well. There was never, she meant, in case she spared him, to be the shadow of a reference to the subject of his suspicions of her; they were not to be supposed to influence her conduct by a hair's breadth. The only effect of his entertaining them had been to place him, bound hand and foot, at her mercy.

'You may depend, madam, for the future—if you are so good as to look over what has happened—upon my most faithful service,' he pleaded humbly.

'I do not thank you for that, sir,' she answered coldly. 'Your recognisances are sufficiently heavy to secure your good behaviour.'

'And in the meantime you will promise me, madam——'

'Nothing,' she interrupted slowly; 'I will make no compact with you of any sort or kind. Stop; upon second thoughts, you may leave the papers. If you receive them again, you may take it for a sign that you are retained in Sir Richard's service, at my pleasure.'

The Agent bowed almost to the ground, and passed out of the room by another door, just as Sir Richard entered it, cigar in mouth, from the library.

'What, then you have not brought Morris to book after all, Nannie? Confess now, you have found a mare's nest, and sent him away to escape my gibes.'

'I am by no means satisfied of his rectitude; but there is still a doubt, and for the present, at all events, I am induced to give him the benefit of it.'

'Quite right; it is all very well to talk of "making examples" of people, but in the first place one is not perfect one's self; and in the second, I have arrived at that period of life when there seems nothing to be desired so much as peace and quietness.'

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE BILLIARD-ROOM.

THERE is nothing in social life which is more agreeable to young women than to be admitted into the sanctuaries of the other sex. A dinner at a bachelor's rooms has always more charms for them than the ordinary 'cock and hen' festivities; if there should be any inconvenience as regards space or accommodation, that only adds to 'the fun' of the thing; the sense of sacrilege—of penetrating, be it ever so little, into the mysteries of man—is delightful to them. This is what makes the billiard-room of a country house their favourite apartment. They are dimly aware that matters go on there, in their absence, very differently; that when gentlemen are alone, they are much less reserved in their manners; lay wagers, indulge in brandies and soda, and occasionally, when they miss their strokes, even in strong language; that they are not so patient with their partners, and certainly never give them lessons — often unnecessarily prolonged—as to holding their cue, or making a bridge; and that the marking-board especially is not a subject for jokes. From this sanctum, chaperons as a general rule are excluded; the bonds of conversation are relaxed; and all goes as merry as a marriage-bell, a metaphor that seems somehow peculiarly appropriate to the situation. Each young gentleman is literally a host in himself, and vies with the others in doing the honours to his visitors.

To both Clara and Lucy billiards had been a joy unknown until the arrival of the Trevors, and it formed one of the chief attractions at the Court to both of them; but it was only Lucy who cared for the game itself. To her sister it was a very secondary object, and it pleased her to take part in it solely on account of the opportunities it afforded her of learning other things. The atmosphere of the place suited Hugh Trevor much better than that of the drawing-room, and in it he unconsciously displayed his true character. This, more or less, is a peculiarity of all games, which should therefore never be despised by those who would be students of human nature. When engaged in serious affairs of any kind—not excluding love-making—men have a definite end in view, and mould their behaviour so as to attain it; but at play they are off their guard. If money is concerned, their natures can be read like print; the lust of gain is shameless, and makes no effort at concealment; cunning drops its specious mask, and shows itself in its own paltry guise; the mean advantage, the small trickery, proclaim the rogue in grain, though he may never ripen for the gallows. And even when money is not concerned, there are indica-

tions enough: a man, for example, must be an angel indeed who misses his stroke at billiards without a murmur; on the other hand, if the top of his cue comes off, and he remains dumb, the conclusion one rightly draws is still more disadvantageous to him; such unnatural self-command suggests the murderer. From misfortunes of this graver kind Hugh Trevor's skill and prudence preserved him; he was a good player, and, as is the case with most of us in whatever we do well, he took pains to excel.

Charlie was equal to him in execution, but did not look so far ahead. Gurdon was only a moderate performer.

'I will stand and mark,' was his apt quotation as soon as he discovered his inferiority, and that humble position at the scoring-board he had maintained; it afforded him welcome opportunities of observation. The two brothers amused him. They were both good *raconteurs;* and in their choice of stories, as often happens, their characters could be detected. Hugh had a dry and caustic wit; he delighted in painting the weakness and even the wickedness of his fellow-creatures; he was a fish that loved the mud, and rose to no fancy flies. Charlie was full of high spirits and good-humour, and liked to tickle the heart-strings.

On the morning when Mrs. Thorne called at the Court to speak with Lady Trevor about the invitation from Catesby, she left her daughters at the door of the billiard-room, where their three cavaliers were waiting for them. The two sisters and the two brothers played together as usual, Hugh being partner with Clara, and Charlie with Lucy: a fair arrangement enough; but the former pair were generally beaten through Clara's shortcomings, which Hugh resented not a little. He was a man who always expected to get the better of his fellow-creatures, and, if he failed in doing so, would inquire with frowning brow of the government of the universe how such things could be. On the present occasion there was no necessity for going so far for an explanation. Clara either failed in carrying out his instructions, or missed her stroke altogether. There is a story told of an old Scotch Lord of Session, who, playing with a lady at whist, suddenly exclaimed: 'What a d—d old fool you are!' Immediately afterwards he apologized, explaining that for the moment he had mistaken her for his wife.

Hugh looked at Clara, when she made a mess of the game, as the Lord of Session must have looked. His lips moved, and, though they said nothing, one could easily guess what sort of words they were shaping. Clara herself, however, seemed utterly unconscious that anything of the kind was taking place. Whether she struck her ball too high or too low, or on the wrong side, she never seemed aware of failures. 'What is

wanting in effect,' she seemed to be saying to herself confidently, 'is more than compensated for by the grace and dignity of my movements.' If she had once acknowledged herself in the wrong, she felt that Hugh would not have spared her; if she had said, as girls do under the like circumstances, 'How stupid I am!' she knew that, far from combating the remark, he would have corroborated it; and she never gave him the opportunity. Sometimes a cloud crossed his face—caused less by her blunders than her studied indifference to them—only too full of meaning; like the scowl the 'navvy' bestows upon 'his old woman' before company, a 'wait-till-I-get-you-home' look, that makes the lady shiver. But Clara Thorne did not shiver, though she partly comprehended its meaning. The two young people were by this time on very confidential terms; it was not remarked by the other couple, who were very literally otherwise engaged, but Gurdon, the observant, had said to himself more than once, 'Those two understand one another;' and at all events one of them understood the other. It could hardly be said that the more she saw of him the more she liked him, but her knowledge of him in no respect weakened her resolve. She had scratched her Russian, and found him a Tartar; but the discovery had not alarmed her; she only said to herself, 'I must tame the Tartar.'

The first words she had said to him that morning, as they were selecting their cues, were:

'So you have got your way'—an allusion to the invitation from Catesby Hall.

'I generally do,' had been his grim response.

'You remind me,' she answered, smiling, 'of Mr. Barry Lyndon.'

'Who was he?' he answered surlily; he felt an uneasy consciousness that he ought to know.

'An Irish gentleman who flattered himself he could break any woman's heart in a week.'

He grinned as if she had paid him a compliment; it pleased him to think that he could win her heart without giving himself the trouble of pretending to be soft and tender; but this consciousness only made her indifference to his approval more irritating. If she were willing to take him without warranty, as it were, why did she not show more subservience to his whims and fancies? She had never paid less attention to his teaching at billiards than that morning, and her disobedience, as he called it in his own mind, had caused him to lose three consecutive games. At the conclusion of the last, he put away his cue, and declined to play any more.

'Come, Gurdon, will you play?' inquired Charles, with a certain significant inflection in his tone, that could not have been mis-

taken by much duller ears than those which heard it. It seemed to say, '*You* are not given to the sulks, at all events.' But before the painter could reply, Clara, who, though reserving to herself the right of rebellion, would strike in for her tyrant when he was attacked by others, had pretended she was tired, so they all took their seats about the fire—which was always lighted when the day was wet—and began to chatter. The rain reminded Charlie of his last wet day in London, on which a humorous incident had taken place.

He had been dragged to a great marriage, where five hundred people had snatched a meal which had looked like a ball supper, but was called 'breakfast,' and were all yearning to get away; they had overflowed from the crowded house under a long awning through which the wet dripped, waiting for their fine carriages; a fat woman stood upon his toe, giving him pain that would have been intolerable but for his belief (subsequently shown to be unfounded) that she was a duchess. The inconveniences endured by this fashionable mob in their pursuit of pleasure, their selfishness and brutality to one another, he described with the more gusto since he saw it displeased his brother. Suddenly a splendid footman attached to the establishment called for a four-wheeled cab. Everybody looked at one another aghast. It was only the least distinguished of the guests who had ventured to come in even what the Americans call 'one-horse affairs,' something drawn by a single quadruped, but still their own. The very horses, champing their bits, seemed to throw up their noses in scorn at the summons in their midst of such a vehicle. Presently, however it emerged from the sea of chariots, and drove up to the door, a sorry spectacle indeed. The driver had a pipe in his mouth, and a patch over his eye; the window was broken, and mended with brown paper; it was the most debauched-looking 'growler' that ever was seen; that it should delay for a moment the advent of a respectable carriage seemed an inversion of the laws of Nature. But not a laugh was heard; a sense of humour is not what fashionable folks most pride themselves upon. On the contrary, there was 'the hushed amaze of hand and eye' at the prospect of seeing the person who had evoked this terrible conveyance get into it. '*The* four-wheeled cab!' exclaimed the footman, in stentorian tones. There was no response; the individual who had ordered it, like the student who raised the devil, shrank from the enterprise he had so rashly entered upon. He had not bargained for a cab like that. Three times did the frenzied footman repeat his challenge, while the driver smoked on unmoved, regarding the brilliant throng like Barbarism looking down on Civilization; but the glove lay where it fell, and eventually the four-wheeled cab was sent away.

It was a good story admirably told, though with too strong a dash of contempt.

'You seem to me, Mr. Charles, to enjoy breaking a butterfly on a wheel,' said Clara.

'He likes men and women better than gentlemen and ladies,' remarked Hugh, nodding approval, and not displeased to be in accord again with the fair speaker.

'I confess I prefer Mirbridge to Mayfair,' observed Charles sententiously.

'I am not quite sure whether that is a compliment,' said Lucy doubtfully. 'Does he mean that you and I are outside the gilded pale of society, Clara?'

'Indeed, I did not mean that,' put in Charlie confusedly.

'He means that he prefers farmers to people of fashion,' emphasized Hugh. 'I can't say I agree with him. Let me tell you a story Mr. Jacob Austin told me the other day, in perfect good faith, and with the idea that he was making a favourable impression on me—it is very characteristic.'

'Why take Farmer Austin instead of Farmer Wurzel as a type of his class?' inquired Charles.

'Silence for Mr. Jacob Austin's story!' exclaimed Gurdon, striking the marking-board with his cue like the chairman of a public meeting.

'The farmer and I were talking about the rogues in Mirbridge——'

'But I beg to say there are none,' interrupted Lucy indignantly.

'Ho, ho! I like that,' sneered Hugh. 'Why I saw one, and a very big one, ride past that window not an hour ago.'

'Mr. Morris is your land-steward, Mr. Hugh, and we have nothing to do with him; he does not belong to papa's parish. Clara, why don't you defend our people against this slanderer?'

'Well, my dear, we have a black sheep or two, it must be confessed,' said Clara. 'There is your friend, Jack Beeton, for example.'

She had mentioned him merely to give a helping hand to Hugh; but no sooner had the name passed her lips than she regretted it. She was generally very careful to avoid all allusion to him.

'Oh, as to Jack,' said Hugh, with an uncomfortable laugh, 'there is nothing much amiss with him, except poaching.'

'But I thought poaching was one of the deadly sins?' observed Charles drily.

Hugh's face turned scarlet, but he took no notice of the observation.

'Mr. Austin's story,' he said, 'refers only to the past. I asked him whether a robbery had ever been committed at Mirbridge.

"Yes," he replied; "and in this very farm, just seventy years ago. My grandfather lived here before me, and died at ninety-five—he was a very fine old man. In those days people did not send their money to the bank every market-day, but kept it till there was a good sum in hand. He had two hundred guineas in the house at the time in question. He was away at Derby, and there were only female servants in the house when the robbery was committed. It was done by three men, two of them strangers—professionals from London; but the third was a discharged farm-servant of his own, who had lived with him thirty years. They all wore black crape on their faces; but the mask of this man had slipped aside, and he had been recognised. When my father came home and learnt what had happened, he was in a pretty state. He was a very fine old man, and went to work with a will. There were no telegraphs in those days; but he had hand-bills printed, with a description of the thieves, and every mail-cart was supplied with one. As there were no railways, the robbers could only take to the highroad. As two of them were used to the work, it was likely that they, being Londoners, would make for town—and so it turned out. They were caught at Oxford—all three of them—and brought back to Derby for trial. My grandfather gave his evidence, and swore to the guineas, some of which he had marked—he was a very fine old man—and they were all convicted. The farm-servant had had a good deal said for him by the girls, who, but for him, would have been ill-treated by the other two; and, before the judge passed sentence, he spoke to my grandfather about him. 'This man, Mr. Austin, it seems, lived with you for thirty years, and before he committed this heinous crime you had no fault to find with him. Perhaps, in consideration of that circumstance, and because he restrained his companions from ill-treating the women, you may—as prosecutor—wish some difference to be made in his punishment. The other two will certainly be hung; what say you?' Then my grandfather replied as follows: 'My lord, since they all came together, in God's name let them all go together'—he was a very fine old man."'

'What a terrible story!' exclaimed Lucy.

'It is not *my* story,' returned Hugh, laughing. 'It was told me by your papa's leading parishioner and churchwarden.'

'It seems to have amused you very much.'

'It did. Mr. Austin's *beau idéal* of a fine old man tickled me exceedingly.'

Lucy did not reply, but her face spoke for her. She would have disliked Hugh Trevor in any case; but on account of his relations with her sister she detested him. She could not think of encouraging one so cruel and sardonic.

'I suppose mamma has gone home, Clara?'

'Yes, a long time ago. I saw her cross the courtyard just as Mr. Morris rode up.'

'Speak of an angel and you hear the flutter of his wings,' observed Mr. Gurdon. 'There goes the gentleman in question.'

There was a clatter of hoofs in the courtyard as the land agent was seen mounted on his cob, well protected from the pouring rain by waterproof and overall. The young people moved to the windows and watched him ride away. His usually rubicund face had lost its colour, and his huge frame was bowed over the horse's head.

'Something has put him out,' continued Mr. Gurdon thoughtfully. 'I suppose he has made a good deal of money in his calling?'

'Added to what he has made by thrift,' remarked Clara.

'Did you say thrift or theft?' said the painter slyly.

'It is very much the same thing, Mr. Gurdon.'

'A very just observation, Miss Thorne,' he answered admiringly. 'The man that never gives is always ready to take.'

In the meantime Hugh and Charles were growling at one another—subject, the classes and the masses. Near relatives do not quarrel about such matters unless they want to quarrel—they agree to differ; but the two brothers agreed in nothing.

'I say that your swells have the worst morals and the worst manners of all except the criminal classes,' Charles was saying.

'How do you *know?*' was Hugh's sneering rejoinder. The shaft went home, for not even a Radical likes to be told that he is unacquainted with the nobility of his native land. Hugh rubbed it in with a contemptuous laugh.

'Pooh, pooh!' he continued; 'you will never persuade me that Jacob Austin, or, for that matter, Jonathan Wurzel, is my equal.'

'I was not speaking of you; I was talking about the aristocracy,' replied Charles.

It was a neat little thrust, and Hugh winced at it, for no one appreciated his own 'position' in the world so highly as himself.

'The question is——' he began hotly.

'Where are we to have lunch?' put in Clara authoritatively. 'We have not been invited *yet*, my dear Lucy, to have it here, and in the meanwhile we are missing our humble meal at home.'

'Well, of course you are going to have it here,' said Hugh ungraciously; for he did not like his thunder being stopped in mid-volley, though there was that in Clara's tone which quelled him.

'There goes the gong,' cried Gurdon, with a gasp of genuine satisfaction (for he knew how narrowly a fraternal row had been escaped). 'Hooray!'

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT LUNCHEON.

EVERY meal, save one, has had its eulogists and admirers; there are some people who even speak highly of breakfast. To my mind, and not, alas! to my *mind* only, a very poor performance. In our youth, indeed, it may have been well enough. There were great entertainments in one's college days that passed under that unassuming title. They were like wedding-breakfasts, and claret-cup and bitter beer were drunk at them. Breakfast-parties are still given by a few persons of distinction in town, but only very idle people enjoy them. An unnatural air of would-be gaiety pervades them; the guests are like Bacchanals the next morning: they have occasional doubts whether it is not a very late supper; and they are all 'upset' for the day. The praises of dinner have been sung repeatedly, though most often by those who have known what it is to want it. It is, indeed, quite amazing, and can only be accounted for by the general dulness of mankind, that even public dinners are still popular. The certainty of the plates being cold, and the probability of one's being placed between strangers (and everyone knows what sort of a conversationalist your stranger is likely to be), seem to have no deterrent effect. The speaking afterwards is thought rather attractive than otherwise. If a gentleman was to get on his legs and insist upon addressing the company *before* dinner, I suppose he would be torn to pieces; but after his wits have been dulled by wine and food, his utterances are welcomed with enthusiasm. Suppers, again, have had their encomiasts, and not without reason. The work of the day is over, and the revellers, who, of course, have no thought for the morrow (or they would not be supping), feel that they have earned the right to give themselves up to unrestrained mirth; the fun is more fast and furious than at any other meal; but supper-eaters do not live long.

Even that terrible institution 'Five o'clock tea' is not, I believe, without its partisans. I once attended an entertainment of that nature, and overheard the following remark, made in a low and earnest tone by a very pretty young woman to her admirer:

'I have often wondered whether the cuckoo is called the cuckoo because it *says* cuckoo?'

I thought that 'often wondered' was a sad admission, but it is impossible that people who eat muffins within two hours of their dinner can cultivate the understanding.

While commendation has been showered upon all these meals in their time, not a word has been said in favour of lunch. You may search through the British poets and find not a single line

in its honour. Calverly, indeed, mentions it, but only as an accessory before the fact to tobacco.

The philologists talk of luncheon or 'nuncheon,' and vulgarly define it as 'a handful of food.' This neglect is the more inexplicable since luncheon is the chief meal of the day to the great majority of the Anglo-Saxon race; that, indeed, may be the very reason why Fashion shuts her lips about it; she is ashamed of having the same desires as the middle-class, who notoriously eat most at mid-day. People who don't eat lunch always eat too much dinner, and become more or less lethargic afterwards, which makes them an easy prey to the public speaker. It is the time when the intelligence is keenest, which in the morning is but half aroused, and in the evening is jaded. The sun, which is then at its best, assists its geniality. I am told that the most satisfactory 'operations' in the City are transacted over this pleasant meal. Women, in my opinion, are rarely seen to more advantage than when partaking of it. Their manners are then most natural, and therefore most charming. There are none of those artificial restraints which at dinner make them stiff and formal.

Luncheon at Mirbridge Court was admitted by all its inmates to be its most enjoyable meal. It did not take place in the dining-room, but in an apartment at one time called the schoolroom, opening upon the terrace, with four large French windows all commanding a superb view. When these were open, as on the present occasion, it almost seemed that the company were in the open air; it was like a picnic without any of its inconveniences, and suggested the same freedom from the conventionalities. The presence of Sir Richard and his wife, to all appearance, placed no restraint upon the young people, who laughed and joked as though they were alone; but in reality it did make some difference, as that quiet observer, Mr. Gurdon, did not fail to notice. The brothers, for example, forbore to quarrel, and their behaviour to the young ladies was less pronounced. Hugh, indeed, had little to alter in this respect; his pride and egotism forbade him to be demonstrative in his attentions; he had contented himself, from the first, with 'throwing the handkerchief' to his *inamorata*, and she, on her part, had shown no alacrity in picking it up; there was no proof indeed, to outsiders, that it had been thrown at all. Though Lady Trevor suspected it, there was nothing in the young couple's behaviour to one another to give grounds for her interference; which was, for the present, a relief to her. She was well resolved that her Hugh, for whom nothing seemed too good or too high, should not throw himself away upon Miss Clara Thorne; but she shrank from a contest with him upon any point. Moreover, though she was far from putting the

matter even to herself in so many words, she had great confidence in his infidelity. It was very unfortunate that he should be placed in propinquity to such a beautiful and attractive young woman, but he had yet to learn that there were other girls in the country, if not equally lovely, who had their attractions, and who were much better fitted by fortune and position—both of which he knew how to estimate—to mate with him. However far her son might have gone with Clara—however far, that was, that designing young person might have 'led on' her lamb—she had a shrewd suspicion that he would skip away from her, without much breaking of his heart-strings, if it could be shown that it was to his interest so to do.

That this diagnosis of his character should exist contemporaneously with the tenderest admiration of him may seem strange enough, but it is not uncommon ; the very failings of our dear ones, when they make for their own advantage and security, seem to wear the garb of virtues. Clara herself was a factor in the sum of her apprehensions that Lady Trevor almost disregarded. If she had had more time to give attention to her than a road so full of pitfalls permitted, she would no doubt have taken a juster view, though even then she would probably have underrated her powers. To those who did not know her there was nothing in Clara Thorne suggestive of calculating resolve ; she was only 'designing' in her hostess's eyes, as any other girl similarly circumstanced would have seemed designing. This gave Clara an immense advantage ; she had confidence in herself, not without cause, and she also duly estimated the talents of the woman she knew was to be sooner or later her antagonist at their true value. She appreciated the dexterity of her behaviour, which conciliated all hearts, while at the same time her masterful spirit held them in thrall. Despite the waywardness and egotism of her admirer, and even of his occasional neglect, she felt that the chief obstacle to securing him would be found in the affection of his mother. Not a trace of this knowledge, however, was to be observed in her manner to that lady, which was always respectful and propitiatory, though without the least touch of servility. She maintained a certain attitude of independence that was natural to her character, but which would, she well perceived, be also advantageous when the relations with her hostess, which at present were not even strained, should become antagonistic.

Lucy, on the other hand, though she could never be a flatterer, was more meek ; the position of Lady Trevor impressed her with no sense of inferiority, but the difference between their years had its proper weight. She treated her with a marked deference which sat all the more becomingly upon her because it was willingly paid. If she did not love her hostess, she had a

pity for her, born of the estimate she had formed of Hugh's character, of which indeed everyone seemed aware, that was akin to love. Lady Trevor's comparative indifference to Charlie, though it caused her some irritation, had its agreeable side ; for the less she cared about him, the less she was likely to oppose him in the matter next his heart. It seemed, indeed, not worth the while of anybody to interfere with this insignificant pair: for Sir Richard, his suspicions of Clara having been laid to rest, beheld no danger in any other quarter, and no one else took any notice of them. Perhaps their youth protected them from serious comment ; for though Charles's matrimonial outlook was much more vague than that of Hugh, he 'carried on' with the object of his affections with far greater openness than his brother, and that under his father's eye. Perhaps he had a shrewd suspicion that, having once come out of his shell of reserve to forbid the banns in one quarter, Sir Richard was not likely to make such an unwonted effort a second time. If he did so, there would be at least an apology for the young fellow in the very fact that his love-making, although so palpable, had been uncensured and unforbidden. It was true that most of the objections the Baronet had urged against Clara had equal force with regard to Lucy, but not all ; on this slender ground of difference Charles was prepared, when the evil hour should come, to defend himself and his choice.

At luncheon, as at all other meals at the Court, it was the hostess who did the honours, lifted the conversation when it flagged, and exerted herself generally to make things pleasant ; the host was usually silent, sombre, and played the part of a skeleton at his own feast. But on the present occasion, their *rôles* appeared to be reversed. The interview which Lady Trevor had had with the steward that morning, though it had resulted in his utter rout and defeat, had taxed her energies to the utmost. She might have said with the king of old, another such a victory, and she was indeed undone.

Mind and body had been subjected to too severe a strain. Taken by itself, it was but a small thing ; but the fact was that Mrs. Thorne's visit, which had taken place only a short half-hour before that of the land steward, had ill-prepared her for the contest with the latter. The Rector's wife, though she could not but feel complimented at Lady Trevor's behaviour in the matter of the invitation to Catesby, felt far more displeasure than she had cared to show in the family circle with Lady Joddrell herself. She was well aware that no such invitation would have been sent to the Rectory, had not the Court previously declined it, and she by no means relished the acceptance of such second-hand hospitality.

'I am deeply grateful to you, Lady Trevor,' she had said, 'for

the kind manner in which you have spoken of us to Lady Joddrell; but that only gives me the more surprise that you should have thought it necessary to have been so ceremonious with us as to decline her invitation for our sakes—some of our party are so constantly partaking of your hospitality.'

'Nay, that hurts me,' interrupted Lady Trevor, with her most winning smile, 'for "some" I would fain read all; it is only that our young people make their little arrangements with yours without my knowledge, and wish them to step in, without formality, to take what happens to be going.'

This remark, though interpolated so quickly, was not made without forethought, since Lady Trevor had seized the opportunity of showing that her sons' familiarity with the young ladies of the Rectory implied no encouragement to them on her own part; but it was far from discreet, for not only was it plain that what was potluck at the Court would be a feast at the Rectory, but the observation seemed to imply that the Rector and his wife would willingly be more frequent guests if they were asked more often. That this was the construction Mrs. Thorne put upon it, could be read in her heightened colour very distinctly, and as it were in red letters.

'Good heavens! what have I said?' cried Lady Trevor, clasping her jewelled hands together, in pathetic despair; 'something stupid and perhaps offensive as well.'

'No, no,' replied Mrs. Thorne gently, touched by the obvious distress of her hostess, at the remembrance of whose foreign origin all personal resentment vanished at once; 'the fact is, that there is a difficulty in this matter, insignificant enough, but hard to explain to one not to the manner born. Lady Joddrell does not very often honour us with her invitations, as you are so good as to do, and we have a shrewd suspicion that but for your letter to her we should not have received one on the present occasion. Our engagement to dine with you on the date in question can very well be postponed to another day, which will leave you at liberty to dine at Catesby Hall; but as for ourselves, I think we had rather stop at home.'

'Then in seeking my own selfish pleasure I have made mischief,' murmured Lady Trevor plaintively; 'I confess at once, dear Mrs. Thorne, that my motive for writing to Lady Joddrell as I did was to produce the very effect which has occurred, and which I now perceive to be deplorable. The idea of dining among total strangers without the encouragement of the presence of those I have learnt to love and respect was alarming to me, and I thought if I could secure your social protection, as it were, it would give me courage. Pray forgive me, for cowardice in a woman—who has not a friend, too, in all wide England but yourselves—is not a deadly sin.'

'Indeed it is not,' replied Mrs. Thorne tenderly; she was touched by the allusion to the other's isolated position, while the flattery, perhaps, implied in her answer was not altogether without its weight. 'If that is your difficulty—though to one in your position it may well appear to be a strange one—I will gladly waive my scruples, though I think they have a reasonable foundation in self-respect. I will, then, accept Lady Joddrell's invitation as far as my husband and myself are concerned; but decline it for my girls, which may naturally be done on the plea of our being so large a party.'

To Lady Joddrell herself, no announcement could have been more welcome; she was very desirous that Mr. Hugh should have an opportunity of seeing the belles of the county without his thoughts being distracted by the presence of his fair neighbour, Miss Clara Thorne; but, unfortunately, it was her presence, as we know, for which Hugh had expressly stipulated. That she should reveal the fact to Mrs. Thorne was, of course, out of the question; she would rather have quarrelled with her on the spot; and yet there was no way out of the scrape without encouraging the very idea which she would fain have ignored, that the young ladies of the Rectory were of great importance in her eyes.

'No, my dear Mrs. Thorne, I cannot accept so great a sacrifice. Indeed, even if it was made, the thought of those dear girls of yours—an ornament, I am sure, to any dinner-party, that could hardly be rivalled—staying at home alone, while their parents were humiliating themselves on my account, would poison what little pleasure I am likely to derive from Lady Joddrell's hospitality. Please to let the matter stand as it was before this hateful invitation arrived. Of course, I wanted Sir Richard to show himself to his old friends, but I am sorry to say he adopted my poor excuse as his own, with great avidity, and he will be only too well pleased to evade his duties.'

'But duties—especially imperative ones such as this most certainly is—should not be evaded, Lady Trevor,' said Mrs. Thorne gravely.

'Of course not; but then you don't know Sir Richard as I do; he is like a schoolboy in getting out of things that are disagreeable to him. "If those charming girls are to be left at home," he will say (though quite as much, I fear, from the excuse it will afford him of stopping at home, too, as from his regard for them), "I will certainly not go to Catesby Hall;" so that your kind offer will only leave us as it found us.'

This veiled appeal had proved successful; Mrs. Thorne, it is true, had a 'proper pride' of her own, but she had also a mother's pride in her daughters. Lady Trevor's compliment to them had been very pleasant to her, and notwithstanding the circumstances

of their invitation to Catesby Hall, she was not altogether displeased that they should have the opportunity of displaying their attractions in a higher sphere than ordinary. Moreover, she was really anxious that the Squire of her parish should mix with his equals, and redeem the family name from the reputation of isolation and reserve that clung to it. She had, therefore, surrendered at all points to the wishes of her hostess, but it was a victory that had cost that lady a struggle. It is true that almost immediately afterwards she gained another in that much more serious conflict with Mr. Morris, but the two engagements left her drained and weak indeed. For the first time, she took her seat at the luncheon-table shaken in nerve, and conscious of a lack of 'grasp' of any situation that might arise, such as she had never known before.

Fortunately, Sir Richard was in tolerable spirits; he was pleased that the threatened row with his steward had been averted, or what was to him the same, had been tided over; and the presence of the two girls stimulated his jaded spirits. When 'the boys' only, as he called the three young men, were with him, he left them to their own society, and was often even unconscious of their conversation; he was always looking behind or before him, on his own unprofitable past or unpromising future.

'My lads,' he said, with a side-glance at the girls, 'I have got news for you. I heard this morning from a Catesby man that there is to be an heiress at the feast to which you are all invited.'

What a mercy it was, was Lady Trevor's reflection, that Mrs. Thorne was not at table; for if she had been, her own hastily framed story of Sir Richard's solicitude about the two young ladies being left at home would have been shattered to pieces. The fact was that her husband knew nothing about the matter, except that Lady Joddrell had invited the party, and that they were going. Of the diplomacy that had been since employed he was in utter ignorance; nor was there any danger in keeping him so, since if, as had been decided, they were to go to Catesby, he had made up his mind for the infliction; while the news that they were not to go, no matter how the result had been arrived at, would be sure to be received with satisfaction. As to the heiress, it was only characteristic of him that he had omitted to mention the circumstance to his wife—men are so 'stupid' about such matters, and poor Sir Richard was even stupider than most of his sex, having overlived the infinitesimal inclination for social intrigue that he had ever possessed. It was very irritating to a well-constituted female mind, but when an opportunity seemed to be thrown in his way for advancing the interests of his family, he was wont to treat it as a joke. In the present company he found only too much encouragement for his frivolity.

'An heiress! But we are three, father,' expostulated Charlie with much gravity. 'What is the use of one heiress among so many?'

'We must draw lots for her,' said Hugh. 'I hope I shall win her;' and as he said it he had the effrontery to squeeze Clara's hand under the table.

'I do think, in a case of this kind,' observed Gurdon, 'that the claim of a guest should be considered. If there was a deficiency of lunch, I conclude I should be helped before either Hugh or Charles; and if there are not heiresses enough to go round, I ought similarly to be offered the first refusal.'

'But no one would be such a fool as to refuse her,' objected Sir Richard. 'She has twelve thousand pounds a year in her own right—all made by her late father at baccarat.'

'At baccarat! How can you be so silly, Richard!' exclaimed Lady Trevor; her interest in behalf of her eldest-born was aroused—maternal hope began to animate her frame.

'Fact, upon my life, Nannie. I knew the man myself—years and years ago,' he added in an apologetic tone. 'Kept a hell—I mean a bank—at Paris; and was a great chum of poor Westrop's.'

'Then she is a friend of Mrs. Westrop's,' remarked Lady Trevor.

'Yes; it was so like that woman that she kept it dark about the young lady who was staying with her being such a "catch" until she got her invited to Lady Joddrell's party. The Chief Baroness' (such was the name by which the not very popular mistress of Catesby Hall was known in the county, though her late husband had borne no such title as it implied) 'is wild, I'm told, at having asked her; for what chance will any of her tribe of daughters have against a three-hundred-thousand-pounder?'

'And what is the young lady's name?' asked Lady Trevor.

'Mumchance.'

A roar of laughter from the young men followed this announcement; there was even a ripple of mirth from Clara and Lucy.

'What *does* it signify,' expostulated Gurdon, 'when one is going to change it?'

'Three hundred thousand pounds! Think of it!' exclaimed Sir Richard with emotion.

'*I am* thinking of it, sir,' said Charlie dutifully, as his foot wandered in search of a smaller one under the table, and pressed it tenderly to prove that he was only joking.

'My difficulty with a strange young lady is, that I never know what to talk about,' observed Hugh, 'but in this case there will be no such obstacle; I dote on baccarat.'

'You need not tell *me* that,' said Sir Richard sullenly; his son had awakened an unpleasant reminiscence, and his short-lived gaiety was dead.

Lady Trevor had still more reason for depression. An un-

looked-for chance, as promising as she could have imagined in her dreams, had indeed presented itself; but she had imperilled it by her own act! What would she have given had she never written that note to Lady Joddrell, or afterwards, had she spared her eloquence in inducing Mrs. Thorne to waive her scruples? Of course there would have been still the initial difficulty in persuading her obstinate firstborn to have dispensed with Clara's company; but had he known of the splendid prospects in store for him, he would surely have consented to give up the passing gratification of a pretty girl's society for the chance of realizing them. Even as it was, however, he would hardly be so blind to his own interests as to suffer mere beauty to eclipse them. There was at least a new string to her bow, in Miss Mumchance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CATESBY HALL.

CATESBY HALL was a very fine place indeed, fit to take rank, if not among the palaces, at least among the first country mansions in England; even its late master, notwithstanding a large income independent of his profession, had been thought to be 'overhoused' in it, and his widow was notoriously in that uncomfortable plight.

Instead of twenty gardeners, she kept but twelve, who gave their attention much more to fruit and vegetables than to flowers; she thought it superfluous not only to paint the lily, but to cultivate it, and in superintending her hot-houses had an eye to Covent Garden rather than her own table. She had picked up the idea that a lack of formality was a great feature in landscape gardening, and made it the excuse for creating a 'wilderness'—by the simple means of letting things alone—out of a large portion of the grounds. 'You must come and see my bluebells,' was an invitation she always gave to her visitors in the early summer, and thereupon would conduct them to these simple bowers, which looked uncommonly like a garden run to seed.

Nevertheless, all immediately about the Hall was kept spick and span, and still made a goodly show. The daisies on the lawn were duly executed every morning; the terraces—of which there were no less than three, each broad enough to turn a coach and four upon—rolled smooth as blotting-paper; the urns and parterres filled with flowers in their season. The house, which was comparatively modern, had none of the picturesqueness of Mirbridge Court, but it was twice its size, and, being built upon an eminence, commanded a much finer view. It had been the humour of its proprietor to compare himself as he stood at his study-window to Robinson Crusoe, because he was monarch of all

he surveyed; but the study at Catesby, it had been ill-naturedly remarked, was rather 'shut in' as regarded outlook, and the parallel was otherwise not very exact, since one can hardly say one's 'right there is none to dispute' to property that one has borrowed money to purchase. In that unaccustomed flight of imagination the old lawyer had even forgotten his mortgages; but that Lethean draught was denied to his relict. It was whispered in country drawing-rooms that Lady Joddrell, notwithstanding the state she still occasionally displayed, was 'a little pressed for money;' the more 'liberal shepherds' of the dining-room gave it a grosser name: the Chief Baroness was, they said, 'devilish hard up.'

On the evening of the dinner-party, of which so much has been said, there was, however, not a sign of impecuniosity to be seen. The ancient hospitality of Catesby Hall was revived in all its splendour. The chief butler was once more himself again, the diminished ranks of his army of subordinates having been recruited from London, where myriads can still be obtained, at a moment's notice, of a commodity of which (it would be idle for the great Republic to deny it) New York cannot furnish many specimens, namely, powdered footmen. 'Low on the sand and loud on the stone,' carriage after carriage dashed up to the stately portals, full of epxectant guests. Their curiosity, however, was far more excited about the party from the Court than about anything that might be provided for them at the Hall. By many of them Sir Richard and his sons had not yet been beheld; and Lady Trevor was a stranger to all of them save to the tenants of the Rector's modest brougham; it was hired for the occasion, and made no attempt to look as if it were otherwise, but the freight of beauty it carried was without peer. If it had not been for the presence of her sister, Lucy would have carried away the bell; and to two fond hearts—those of her father and her lover—it seemed that she did so. She was attired in simple white, with no ornaments of any kind save one white rose in her bosom, that had never bloomed in the Rectory garden; amidst the splendid toilettes of the other gay ladies, she looked indeed *bien distinguée*, like a snowdrop among tiger-lilies. Clara was in white also, but she had some diamonds in her hair; they had belonged to her mother before she was married, and formed her only stock of jewellery; but Mrs. Thorne had never congratulated herself upon their possession so much as now, when she placed them for the first time at her daughter's service. They were of no great value, but their glittering splendour carried out the queenlike suggestion of Clara's beauty. The very footman hesitated in letting down the steps, as he caught sight of her; the butler stammered from the half-glance that fell on her as he announced her father's name. Young Joddrell, standing by his

mother's side at the entrance to the great drawing-room, involuntarily invoked the blessing of Heaven on his soul and body as he beheld her majestic form. Lady Joddrell's heart died within her as she welcomed her with effusion ; she had seen her before, of course, but never looking so entrancingly beautiful, and she not only trembled for her girls, but for her boys. What a fool, she thought, Lady Trevor must be, to encourage the visits of such a tempter to her Eden ; how could she expect that innocent angel, her first-born, to escape her wiles ?

The hired horse had been slow of foot, and most of the company had arrived before the Rectory party, which undesignedly made the impression Clara's entrance produced the greater. By the ladies this was exceedingly resented ; it is only persons of title, or of colossal wealth, who are privileged to keep other people waiting for their dinner ; the Thornes indeed had not done this, but they should have known their proper place in the county, and come early. The Rector's simple explanation that 'the horse from the Bell had only three legs,' popular as he was with everybody, was felt to be insufficient.

Miss Mumchance, who had three hundred thousand pounds of her own, and might reasonably have been thirty minutes late, had already come. She was a tall and rather lanky girl ; not very young nor very lovely, but with a good-natured face ; her hair, if she had been poorer, would have been called red ; being studded with diamonds of a large size, it was held to be auburn or golden. Mrs. Westrop left her side to welcome the new-comers.

'My dear Mrs. Thorne,' she whispered impulsively, 'how can you make us all so horribly jealous ? You have brought with you the handsomest girl in Europe. I don't say I hope she is as good as she looks, because I dislike saints.'

'Still, I hope she is tolerably good,' said Mrs. Thorne, smiling. The wicked widow's compliment had pleased her in spite of herself. But Mrs. Westrop was no favourite of hers.

'Lady Joddrell is furious with me for bringing my heiress, but Mary Anne (that's her dreadful name) will be nowhere to-night, for all her diamonds ; you must come and look at them presently, they are as big as marbles ; and they might just as well be marbles ; your Clara's brilliants—though they are not worth fifty pounds, I suppose—will utterly eclipse them. Ah, dear!' here the little woman sighed profoundly—'what a thing it is to be beautiful and young !'

So many pretty things—but mostly like the French bonbons, instanced by Mr. Charles Trevor, wrapping up something not quite so pretty under them—were said, indeed, to Mrs. Thorne about her daughter's surpassing beauty, that it was a great relief to her when Sir Richard's party arrived—the last to come—and turned further attention into another channel. Lady Trevor, of

course, then became the cynosure of all eyes. 'How lovely she is for her age!' 'How impossible it seems that she should be the mother of two grown-up sons!' 'How thoroughly French she looks!' 'What an air of distinction she has!' 'How perfectly at her ease she seems!' Such were the remarks that dropped from the good-natured ones; others said, 'How admirably she is got up!' 'Anyone would look young who employed such a milliner!' 'One would really hardly recognise it for paint!' 'What an audacious air she has! They say that she stormed the citadel of her husband's heart in twenty-four hours!' 'Poor Sir Richard!'

It was a terrible moment for the subject of these various criticisms. Once and only once had she been at Catesby Hall, having accompanied the late Lady Trevor thither, as her humble companion, on a morning call. Her reception then had indeed been very different from the way in which she had been welcomed that evening. Lady Joddrell had not only snubbed her, but shown by her manner, as plainly as she dared in the presence of her patroness, how highly she had disapproved of her being lifted out of her proper sphere. She had resented such cruel conduct in her heart most bitterly, for it was not her fault that her dear mistress had chosen to do her honour; but it was not for her plebeian lips to murmur. There had even been a partly-heard conversation between the two high-born ladies, in which she had caught the term 'a beggar on horseback,' and knew that it had been applied to herself. Her blood, too, was not 'ditchwater,' and it had flushed to her forehead at the indignity; but, looking back upon it all now, it was curious how her feelings had changed with respect to it. So far from it reviving any animosity against her hostess, she even admitted to herself that that lady had been right; for, indeed, had not the very thing come to pass (though Lady Joddrell knew not how true a prophet she had been) against which she had warned her visitor? Lady Trevor had a son of her own now, in a similar though a less deadly peril, and she could sympathize with her, though, as it were, against her very self, if indeed she could be said to be the same person.

It was, therefore, without the least hypocrisy that she now returned Lady Joddrell's kind salutations. She wished to be friends with her, and, if Hugh could not be induced to woo the heiress, something more. None of the Miss Joddrells were well dowered; but an alliance with any one of them would strengthen Hugh's position in the county, and be infinitely preferable to a union with Clara Thorne. The two mothers, having the same aim at heart, were genuinely cordial to one another. The Chief Baroness not only sheathed her sharp tongue as regarded the new-comer, but threw over her the ægis of her protection. The

middle-aged lady, who had observed that one could hardly recognise Lady Trevor's high colour for paint, was very severely dropped upon.

'I am afraid, my dear madam,' said her hostess, with a pitying smile, 'that your eyes are not quite so young as they used to be.'

If the county expected that the mistress of Mirbridge Court would be dazzled by its splendour, or shrink with shyness from its polite advances, the county was mistaken. She was perfectly urbane and courteous, but also obviously indifferent to what might be thought of her. To those who offered their neighbourly congratulations she was all smiles and gentleness; but if any lady's curiosity manifested itself in some too personal question, she put up her *pince-nez* and regarded the inquirer as an entomologist regards a beetle of the order *communis*, and quite unworthy to be placed in his collection.

Sir Richard and his sons were still more at ease in the social Zion. The Baronet, indeed, did his best not to look as indifferent as he felt to the felicitations of his old acquaintances; but that *mauvais quart d'heure* before dinner—which tries us all—was to him well-nigh intolerable. He had been brought to Catesby contrary to his inclinations, but he would not have come at all if he could have foreseen the fuss that was made about him. References to his Mirbridge life of old were so associated with the cause of his leaving the Court that they were all hateful to him alike, and these people talked of little else. As an alternative they expressed their satisfaction at having him for a companion on the Bench—for on his return home he had been made a magistrate—and asked his opinion (with the view of influencing it) on half-a-dozen local matters about which he had neither interest nor knowledge. He submitted to it all, of course, for there was no help for it, but with obvious resentment, and looked, as Mrs. Westrop said, 'like a martyr, who wasn't a Christian, being bored to death.'

Hugh Trevor's sweet temper had been already put out by the receipt of the information that he was to take Miss Joddrell down to dinner, and he made no effort to conceal the fact. A few of the elder matrons, who had private hopes of him for their daughters, maintained that his air of *brusquerie* and *insouciance* was caused by extreme shyness, but the men pronounced him 'devilish sulky,' and in answer to an inquiry as to what she thought of him, addressed later by Miss Mumchance, her chaperone was heard to observe with unhesitating decision, 'My dear, a cub.' He would have attached himself to the Rectory party, as though there had been nobody else in the room, had not Clara, in an imperious whisper ('You are not my chatelaine yet, that you should hang about me in this fashion'), forbidden him to do so. She was not one of those young ladies

who for a few hours of triumph are prepared to set their sex at defiance for the rest of their natural lives. In revenge he would have sought the heiress, but he found his brother, who had been deputed to take her down to dinner, in possession, and already on excellent terms with her. Irritated at this, he whispered to Miss Joddrell, as she took his arm, that Miss Mumchance must be thirty at the very least. To which that young lady, who was very nervous, and had not even those moderate wits about her to which she could usually lay claim, replied, 'Oh, she's much more than that ; indeed, I'm told she's three hundred thousand.

CHAPTER XXV.

A COUNTRY DINNER-PARTY.

WHATEVER is to be urged against the dulness of rural life, a great dinner-party in the country in June is certainly less depressing than a similar function during the same month in London. The knowledge that there is a garden outside into which, to the adventurous, escape will be presently possible, is a supporting thought. Through the open window, even if the shutters are closed, there come in pleasant scents, and hints of the green coolness out of doors. On the other side of them there are at least no congregation of street-idlers sucking the spikes of the area railings, and hoping to catch a glimpse of what they fallaciously believe to be a scene of unmitigated enjoyment. There is less formality, because the company are all more or less known to one another, and the sense of rareness adds zest to the feast.

Mr. Lascelles, the Chairman of the Quarter Sessions, had been kindly chosen by the hostess to take Clara down to dinner ; he was a bachelor, and had been so for fifty years, in spite of the most resolute attacks from two generations of high-born virgins. Since Clara was so very beautiful, it was possible that she might effect his capture, and, at all events, nobody could accuse her hostess of not having given the girl 'her chance,' but the chief object, of course, had been to place her where she could do as little mischief as possible. Neither Hugh nor any of the male Joddrells was in her vicinity. Opposite, however, sat Lucy with one of them, who had received a maternal caution not to make a fool of himself with his fair neighbour ; it was doubly superfluous, first, because (like the poet) he was 'born, not made' a fool, and, secondly, because he never took his eyes off her sister from soup till ice-pudding time.

Clara Thorne was a woman, indeed, to turn the heads not only of all sorts and conditions of men, but of men of all ages. The glamour she cast over this fledgling Joddrell fell, to some

extent, even on the stout Chairman of the Quarter Sessions: he kept repeating to himself, 'Steady, Lascelles, steady; after all she is only a monstrous fine gal,' as a charm against her fascinations, and afterwards confessed that he had never been so nearly taken in and done for in all his life. But he little knew the imminent peril in which he had really stood. If he had proposed to her, and could have been got to put it in writing at the back of his *menu* card, it is my belief that the course of this veracious history would have been changed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, for himself, as folks may think, he was spell-bound; he felt if he did not hold his tongue that he should commit himself, and, therefore, he remained dumb.

Clara's other neighbour was a Master of Hounds, and rattled on in full cry; but he was a married man and risked nothing. Once or twice she cast a furtive smile at Hugh, at the other end of the table, but it was not returned, though his gaze was riveted on her; he was not one of those persons of whom it is said by their detractors that their temper is not to be depended upon—when he was once put out he remained so for a long time. While in this condition, he had a habit, probably inherited from his father, of swearing softly to himself. Unaware of this peculiarity, poor Miss Joddrell, who, of course, could not believe her ears, would faintly murmur, 'I beg your pardon, I did not quite catch what you said?' when he would smile grimly, and plunge into conversation for a minute or two. Clara perceived it all, and shook with silent laughter, as the M.F.H. described to her at considerable length how in some run last winter no less than ten men 'came croppers.' He pronounced her afterwards to be not only the handsomest girl in England, but one who understood a joke.

Charlie made the running with the heiress in a manner which, if it had been Hugh instead of him, would have delighted his mother's heart. Of course, if Hugh would not exert himself to win her, she ought not to have grudged her to her younger son, but she could not bear the thought of her darling thus 'sinning his mercies.' She, too, well understood why that frown corrugated the forehead of her eldest son, and cursed that fatal beauty, which, in public or in private, held his too susceptible heart in thrall; and yet it was so difficult—the dear boy having so proud a spirit—to put a stop to the thing. She made up her mind, as a last resort, to represent to Hugh that in case Charlie should win Miss Mumchance he would be in a better position in the county than himself, a consideration which she well knew would have no light weight with him. Charlie's own interests scarcely entered into her thoughts; so easy it is, having once done a man a wrong, to contemplate the doing him another.

Sir Richard, on the other hand, whose languid attention

had been aroused by the same cause, was well pleased to note his favourite son lifting with so light a hand the three-hundred-thousand-pounder. Nothing would have given him more satisfaction than to see him win her; that in so doing he would 'wipe Hugh's eye,' as he expressed it to himself, would by no means have detracted from his enjoyment, but the chief happiness it would confer upon him would be the sense of personal relief. Well placed and well provided for, Charlie would be no longer the object of pity and remorse that he now was to him; his conscience—or so he flattered himself—would henceforth cease to trouble him. It was true that at the best Charles would still be defrauded of his title after his father's death, but, if he hankered after such vanities, it was possible that even that might be remedied by a judicious outlay of Miss Mumchance's money. As for that young lady herself, as apart from her wealth, I am afraid she was utterly left out of Sir Richard's calculations.

Almost the only person, indeed, in the whole company who did not give one thought to Miss Mumchance's fortune was the young gentleman who seemed in such a fair way to get it; his indifference in the matter, no doubt, assisted him very materially, for it was rare to the great heiress to meet a companion at the dinner-table who ignored her financial position, and treated her like any other young woman—nay, even more familiarly, for it must be confessed that Mr. Charles's manners, though perfectly courteous and gentlemanlike, were not those of the Vere de Veres. His spirits were high, his disposition frank, and he felt himself at home wherever he was. Artificiality and affectation were hateful to him; he disliked airs in a woman almost as much as swagger in a man, and the more natural she was the more she was sure to please, and to be pleased with him.

Naturalness is not, of course, to be recommended to everybody; but Charles Trevor could afford to display that gift. He had no meannesses to conceal, and though tender to youth, and respectful to old age, had not the slightest regard for adventitious distinctions. His education had been loose and fragmentary; it was fortunate for him that he had a keen intuition, or he would often have displayed a shameful ignorance; but he had the art of making himself agreeable—where any reasonable opportunity was given to him—in a very high degree. Pride and Priggism shrank from his bright genial talk, like hothouse plants from the wholesome breeze of Spring; but all persons with any strata of good nature, however overlaid by form and gloss, were attracted by it, and Miss Mary Anne Mumchance was very much attracted. It is fair to say, however, that she was already prejudiced in his favour by her friend Mrs. Westrop, who had been favourably impressed with him at their

meeting on the Four Acre. That lady did not like the look of his brother, and had already constituted herself his partisan; and, so far as she could influence matters, she had resolved—if it came to a question of Hugh or Charles as a suitor for her heiress—that Charles should not be the rejected one.

The necessity for such a choice was of course at present in the clouds, but no one, whether male or female, even so much as looked at Miss Mumchance without an eye to the matrimonial disposition of her. What was ludicrous enough, Mrs. Westrop was thoroughly convinced that in advocating Charles's cause she was pleasing his mother very much. Hugh, it was understood, was well provided for, and to see her younger son in a similar position would surely be gratifying to her. At the same time, being placed next to Charlie, Mrs. Westrop gratified herself by talking to him, and indeed took credit for some self-sacrifice in occasionally leaving him to talk to Miss Mumchance, who sat on the other side. Of the two, Charlie greatly preferred the conversation of the elder lady, of whom it had been shrewdly observed by a judge of such matters, that, 'if she had but smoked she would have been as good as a man.' What was meant by that apparently ungallant opinion, was that she used a certain freedom of speech which put a man at once at his ease with her (if it did not frighten him out of his wits), and established a good fellowship rare between the sexes.

Had Lady Trevor been in her son's place, she would have learnt a good deal about the character and circumstances of the present company, which it would have been of great advantage to her to know: for Mrs. Westrop, though no cynic, was, as Sir Richard had hinted, a very acute commentator, and spared nobody, not even herself.

'You and I, Mr. Charles,' she observed, 'are both as poor as Job, which should be a bond between us. We must make common cause against all these prosperous people.'

'By all means,' replied Charlie gaily. 'Whose pocket shall I pick while you knock him on the head?'

'I think you might at least have made the division of labour the other way,' she answered reproachfully. 'However, it is quite true that of us two it is I who am the combative one. You see, I have lost my money, which makes me bitter and antagonistic; whereas you, I suppose, have never had any to lose.'

'Not a stiver,' was the frank reply.

'And yet you don't resent it. You are like the needy knife-grinder—a wretch whom no sense of wrong can rouse to vengeance. My dear Mary Anne, this young gentleman is like yourself—much too good-natured.'

Then she let the young people talk together a bit, consoling herself for her own silence by watching the gloom that their laughter

evoked upon the face of her hostess. That lady began to have a very different opinion of Charlie from that she had formed of him when she had first made his acquaintance in the belief that he was Sir Richard's heir. Under the cloak of openness and good-humour she beheld an audacious and designing young man. It was downright impertinence in such a detrimental to be so much at ease with an heiress ; but she had sufficient intelligence to perceive that there might be a prospect of success for him through the very simplicity of his method of attack ; while others were advancing their parallels, he might carry the citadel by a *coup de main*. She understood, too, that Mrs. Westrop, with her natural leaning to Bohemianism and antagonism to the proprieties, was assisting him in his unhallowed scheme. No doubt she would one day demand her *quid pro quo* in a percentage on the profits of the transaction.

In this, as we know, Lady Joddrell did wrong to at least one of the parties concerned ; and, what was more surprising, even Mrs. Westrop herself fell into error as regarded her new *protégé's* intentions.

'I am glad to see, Charles,' she whispered fervently, 'that you are at present heart-whole.'

'You must mean that I have a hole in my heart,' he answered plaintively.

'No, no ; now do be serious, if you can, for a little. You know I wish you well, and it may be of great importance to you. I say I am glad to see that you are not like every other man who sets eyes on her—enslaved by your Rector's daughter.'

Charles's eye wandered for a fleeting instant to Lucy, with a twinkle of merriment, then settled down upon her sister.

'Yes, I've watched you, and this is the first time you have looked her way ; it's a great relief to my mind, I assure you, for such an attachment in one in your position would be madness.'

'She would let me know that, herself, I think, if I ventured——'

'Oh, she's rejected you already, has she ?' put in Mrs. Westrop quietly. 'Well, so much the better. That girl, if I am not mistaken, is flying at high game. Even Mr. Lascelles, you see, is not good enough for her ; it is quite on the cards, however, that she has already hooked her fish. In that case you must know it, of course. *Has* she ?'

Here she flashed a glance at him which would have befitted the acutest cross-examiner at the bar ; though mundane enough in its spirit, it seemed to read his very soul.

'She may have hooked him, but she has certainly not landed him,' answered Charlie, laughing.

'But she *will* land him, as sure as he lives,' continued Mrs. Westrop confidently. 'That will be a sad disappointment to

your mother, you know: "He might have looked a little higher," she will say, like the mother-in-law in the ballad. It must be dreadful to her to have such a female detrimental in her own village.'

'They seem to get on, however, pretty well together,' observed Charlie, a little stiffly; he was not annoyed at this plain speaking upon Clara's account, and still less upon his mother's, but by reason of the indirect reflection it cast on Lucy. If her sister was a 'detrimental'—a term which he was far from resenting as applied to himself, but which he thought ill-befitting a young lady—Lucy was a detrimental too.

'Of course they get on now; it is for the interest of neither to quarrel with the other at present; but they are both standing upon a Vesuvius, the crust of which is of the thinnest.'

'Let us say on an Etna—as advertised at three-and-six,' returned Charlie drily; 'it sounds more domestic.'

'Now you're angry,' said Mrs. Westrop.

'Not a bit of it; only melodrama is out of my line.'

'Well, it isn't much in mine; but I wish I could teach you to be a little more serious. Life isn't all beer and skittles, as my poor husband used to say too late; for it was skittles that ruined him.' She uttered a little sigh at the remembrance, while Charlie shook with inward mirth. 'Now you're in a good humour again,' she continued, quite unruffled, 'I wish to say that my little cottage is open to you, sir, whenever you choose to make a call. It may be well worth your while, I do assure you.'

'You are most kind, I'm sure,' he answered gratefully, but with a certain hesitation of manner.

'You needn't be afraid,' she whispered. 'Mary Anne will not take you for a mere fortune-hunter. She is much more sensible than she looks—Lady Joddrell is trying to catch your mother's eye. Fortunately for her, she does not labour under the usual disadvantage of having to listen to her neighbour's conversation at the same time, for Sir Richard hasn't opened his mouth to her this half-hour. How bored he looks, and no wonder!—Now we're off. We shall meet in the garden presently, sir; for I've made up my mind to get into the garden.'

'Then you will certainly do it,' said Charlie, laughing, as Mrs. Westrop sailed out of the room with her heiress, like a frigate in convoy of an Indiaman.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AFTER DINNER.

'Sir Richard, what are you taking?' inquired young Mr. Joddrell, with a glance at the decanters, which were delaying in front of the Baronet like vessels waiting in the Downs for a wind

'No more wine, thank you. I will take a cup of coffee presently, and in the meantime, with your permission, a cigar.' And, without waiting for a reply, he took out his case, and lit one.

In the country Civilization progresses with slower steps than in London. It was the custom at Catesby to consume certain magnums of claret after dinner, as in the Dark Ages, and to converse learnedly of the vintage to which it belonged. The great legal luminary (extinct) who had reigned there had not been a smoker, and the Chief Baroness, out of respect for his memory (and also because she hated tobacco), forbade the usual weed, except in the smoking-room. The elder guests professed the same old-fashioned opinions, and were inclined to murmur at this innovation, which they suspected might cut off the usual supply of their favourite liquor. The younger men, including the host, were, on the other hand, in favour of it, and in their hearts regarded its audacious proposer as a benefactor of his species.

'It's rather early for the cigars, is it not, Sir Richard?' remonstrated the M.F.H.

'It's not *too* early,' was the Baronet's calm reply. 'For my part, I look upon dinner—and also on every other meal—as a mere preparation for smoking.'

Hugh Trevor, dutiful in one respect, had already followed his father's example, and lit his cigar.

'Then I really think we had better have the windows open,' observed Mr. Lascelles, with a puff of discontent.

'Just so; you are quite right to think of Lady Joddrell's curtains,' said Sir Richard blandly. He was irritated, like Hotspur by the fop who objected to the smell of gunpowder.

This proposal was carried into effect at once. Instead of the lace curtains and the gilt shutters they half concealed, the noble terrace with its rows of flowers, and the trim lawn sloping down to the park below, displayed their cool loveliness to view. It was a transformation scene that was welcome to everybody, even the old fogies, though they were disinclined to confess it.

'I hope I am not scandalizing you, Joddrell,' said Sir Richard apologetically, 'by my foreign habits.'

The young man hastened to observe that so far from being scandalized, he thought the opening of the windows was a great improvement; as to the smoking, however, he thought of his lady mother, and the row there would be about it next morning, and was silent. Sir Richard fathomed his thoughts.

'Try one of my cigars,' he continued wickedly. 'I think you will like the brand;' and he passed one over to him. The young gentleman took the forbidden fruit, not, indeed, without a pang of scruple, but nothing loath.

In two minutes all his younger guests were smoking. Sir

Richard had placed himself at the head of the social revolution. It proved successful, and from that moment he was revered accordingly; but not without provoking some enmity.

'I believe that fellow will smoke upon the bench of magistrates,' whispered the M.F.H. to Mr. Lascelles.

'If he does, begad, I'll commit him,' was the grim response.

The old gentlemen, indeed, were a great deal put out.

'Do you think this is the right claret?' whispered the Chairman doubtfully; 'or has this infernal smoke spoilt my palate?'

'What do you mean? Do you think it is not the old bin?' ejaculated the M.F.H., aghast.

'I am not sure. The Chief Baroness is quite capable of putting us off with an inferior article.'

Then they drank slowly and homœopathically, with their old heads thrown back like a couple of ducks, till they had convinced themselves there was no mistake; when their ruffled feathers sank peacefully down, and they set to work in earnest.

'Your brother seemed to be getting on uncommonly well with the heiress,' murmured one of the younger Joddrells to Hugh, under the impression he was saying something pleasant.

'I dare say. She looks easy to please.'

'Yes, up to a certain point; but I find one doesn't get much further with her.'

'Very likely.'

The simple youth, unconscious of sarcasm, pursued his theme.

'She does not give herself airs, however, I *will* say for her. Don't you think, considering what a pot of money she's got, that she's rather good-looking—what one would call in Scotland a bonnie girl?'

'Not bonnie—bony,' was the uncompromising reply: and it closed the conversation.

The report that young Joddrell gave of Mr. Hugh Trevor to his contemporaries in the county, though less diplomatically expressed than those in use at the Foreign Office, was accurate and comprehensive:

'A clever fellow enough; but sulky as a dipped cat, and damned disagreeable.'

Charlie, on the other hand, made friends with everybody, though less inclined for talk than usual. He was still feeding on the last look that Lucy had cast at him as she left the room, and he had also Mrs. Westrop's words to think about: 'My little cottage is open to you whenever you may make a call.' He well understood that this was not a mere vague invitation, and that, whatever other feelings might have prompted it, goodwill towards himself was largely mixed with them. If he should take advantage of her kindness, he felt he would be doing so on false pretences; while, if he ignored her proffered hospitality,

so acute a woman as Mrs. Westrop would make a shrewd guess at the reason why. As to being shaken in his allegiance to Lucy by the three-hundred-thousand-pounder, the idea of such a thing—but for the complications it might bring about—was ludicrous to him. Notwithstanding which, he liked the heiress—doubtless, none the less that she had shown a liking for himself, but chiefly for her simplicity and good-humour—and resented the familiar manner in which she was being discussed by the young gentlemen in his neighbourhood. If she had belonged to their own set, they would, doubtless, have been more respectful; but the claims of sex are not so readily acknowledged by our gilt youth as those of birth and lineage. Moreover, it was a disadvantage, from a social point of view, to Miss Mumchance that she had Mrs. Westrop for a *chaperon*—a lady who ruled less by love than fear. It was indelicately suggested that the widow 'financed' her, and would receive at least as high a commission upon the young lady's being favourably placed in the matrimonial market, as the percentage of profit which his keeping the tables at baccarat had given her unlamented papa. Charlie's sharp tongue would have done no little execution among these free speakers, and he was sorely tempted to use it, but for the consideration that his advocacy would have confirmed the general suspicion that he had earned some right to defend her.

Even his father took an opportunity of dropping a characteristic word of mock felicitation into his ear.

'Well, my boy, I congratulate you upon your good fortune, or rather upon the lady's. I hope you may some day be in the unique position of being able to lend your father a little money.'

In this case Charlie did venture upon a word of remonstrance.

'Really, father, I do think it is rather hard upon Miss Mumchance, who is an honest, simple girl, and has no more thought of marrying me than has Mrs. Westrop.'

'But that may be saying a great deal less than you think,' laughed Sir Richard; 'indeed, from what I saw of the goings on of you three, I am inclined to believe that the widow and she are rivals in your affections. I do hope you'll have the good sense to choose the younger.'

Something had happened since dinner which had afforded the Baronet much less ground for satisfaction. Mr. Lascelles, in discoursing of 'the Bench,' as usual, had expressed his hope that Sir Richard would give his fellow-magistrates all the help he could in putting down poaching. 'There's a pestilent fellow in your parish,' he said, 'of the name of Beeton, who has given us a mint of trouble.'

The instant the name was out of his mouth, the worthy Chairman of Quarter Sessions would have given twenty brace of

birds to recall it. For the first time in his life he wished he was a smoker, that he might hide himself—a chaste Ixion—in a cloud. Fortunately it was only a few of the elder guests who recognised the excessive inopportuneness of this reference to the brother of the lady who had caused the Baronet's exit from the country ; and Sir Richard only murmured 'Indeed!' and puffed away at his cigar as though nothing had been said to wound his ear. It was noticed, however, that Hugh's already frowning brow grew darker at the allusion, a circumstance which distressed good Mr. Lascelles considerably. He was a thorough gentleman, and, except for offenders against the game-laws, had a tender heart, and the idea of having recalled the Baronet's early peccadillo to his memory in the hearing of his sons made him miserable for the evening. As it happened, he had much overrated the sensitiveness of Mr. Hugh Trevor, the cause of whose annoyance was something quite different from what he supposed it to be ; while as for Charlie, his thoughts were engaged upon a very different matter. He was 'crooning' to himself (as the Ettrick Shepherd calls it) one of the most charming poems in the language, which has for its subject the superiority of true love over riches. The sly allusions to Miss Kilmansegg and her golden leg, which he heard about him, prevented, indeed, his forgetting the existence of Miss Mumchance, but he only remembered it in association with that of another young lady :

'Have you seen an heiress in her jewels mounted,
That her wealth and she seemed one, and she could be counted?
Have you seen a bosom with one white rose betwixt it,
And did you mark the grateful blush with which the bridegroom fixed it?'

Through the open windows he presently caught the sound of gentle voices and soft laughter on the terrace, whereby he knew that Mrs. Westrop had carried out her programme, and procured the escape of at least some of the ladies into the garden. It was no grave breach of good manners—though if it had been I fear he would have risked it—to step over the sill of the window and join them, an example which was followed at once by half a dozen of the younger guests. It was the first time that the bonds of etiquette, which at Catesby Hall were as the laws of the Medes and Persians, had been so broken through there ; but, as the Chief Baroness afterwards observed, the Trevors had Bohemianism in their blood, and their long residence in foreign parts seemed to have absolutely unfitted them for the rules and regulations of civilized life.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AS OTHERS SEE US.

ALTHOUGH the quarter of an hour before dinner is the most trying time to people in general, who pass it in feeble attempts at conversation, and secret anathemas at their fellow-creatures who are keeping them waiting for their food, the quarter of an hour *after* dinner is for some folks a still worse ordeal. The ladies who have pushed themselves into society superior to their own—or worse, have been helped into it by its males, despite the efforts of its females—regard that terrible period with well-grounded fear. Deprived of their natural protectors—the men—they are thrown among their own sex, like victims into the arena, to suffer from tooth and claw till tardy help comes to them. They think themselves happy if, through generosity or contempt, their adversaries permit them to retire into some curtained corner and pretend to be immersed in a photograph-book or other drawing-room literature. No such retreat, as Lady Trevor was well aware, would have been afforded to her at Catesby Hall if she had been known there for what she really was. She pictured to herself as she sailed into its great drawing-room, the first of the glittering argosy of dames, what a different fate would have been hers had Sir Richard, as some men would have done, 'made a clean breast of it,' and introduced her to the county in her proper person. If it had not been for Hugh—but what an 'if' was that!—it was probable he would have done so. Secrecy was hateful to him, from the worry it involved, and concealment of all kinds foreign to his character. He was the last man in the world for the carrying out of plots and strategies, and, moreover, so far as himself was concerned, he cared nothing at all for the opinion of the world. He never had had much regard for what is called Society, which had always bored him, and he had now become as indifferent to it as a saint. He had arrived, though by a short cut, at that period of existence when life is emptied of its social joys—when the city is strewn with the ashes of extinct pleasures, and the country is haunted by the pale memories of the dead—and it was only for his wife's sake, as she was well aware, that he gave himself the trouble to dissemble.

She could trust to him implicitly, she knew; yet it seemed strange that the whole conditions of her being should depend upon one man's silence. That he had sometimes thought of speaking out was certain—he had hinted at it, indeed, quite lately, in their conversation in the garden at home; but fortunately for all of us, there is an immense gulf between thought and action. (I say 'all of us,' but I suppose there are degrees and differences even in our thoughts: a Bishop, for example,

has a little more control over his audacious speculations, and does not roll the sweet morsel of voluptuous recollection under his tongue, as laymen do). Sir Richard, she felt, would never betray her designedly; but if he did so by accident, or if she herself by some imprudence should reveal the truth, how frightful would be the catastrophe! While she thought of these things, with a smiling face and careless brow, her hostess came up with extended hand.

'My *dear* Lady Trevor,' she exclaimed effusively, 'I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you here in your proper place amongst us; I was so sorry you were from home when I called; do let us have two minutes' talk together before the gentlemen come in and tear you away from me.'

This little hit at her new friend's popularity with the male sex she could not forego, but her manner was genuinely hospitable, and, motioning her guest to a conversation-chair, the two ladies took their seats in it, each looking into the other's eyes.

'It seems only yesterday,' continued the hostess, 'that the late Lady Trevor and I had a confidential talk together in this very room—with only one other person present.'

'Indeed; and who was she?'

The question was superfluous, as the 'person' had happened to be the speaker herself, and the moment she had uttered it she repented of having done so: that 'surplusage is no error' may be true in commerce, but is certainly not so in conversation.

'You take it for granted, I see, that it was a lady; and yet you are not quite right,' said Lady Joddrell, with an acid smile. 'Lady Trevor had her "companion" with her—Letitia Beeton.'

'I have heard of her,' observed Lady Trevor drily.

'I took that for granted, otherwise I should not have ventured to speak of her. In doing so, indeed, even as it is, perhaps I arrogate to myself too much; but as an old friend of the family——'

'No apology is necessary,' put in Lady Trevor sweetly: 'I am sure your allusion must be dictated by kindness, or it would be unintelligible.'

'I hope so; yet my motive, I must admit, is partly a selfish one. I wish to show you on what intimate terms of friendship I was with your predecessor——'

'You mean the late Lady Trevor?' interrupted her companion quickly.

'Yes, of course. Good Heavens, who else could I mean? And then, as regards that other person, I wish to remove from your mind certain impressions of her which it may have received from people well meaning, perhaps, but misled as to her real character. You must not suppose that Sir Richard was so very much to blame.'

'I do not suppose so,' was the grave response. The speaker's face was as calm as marble, yet her tone was full of feeling as well as conviction. Her eyes never left the other's face for a single instant ; whereas those of Lady Joddrell drooped beneath their earnest gaze, and sought the fringe of her gown. She had expected to play the part of Mentor, and notwithstanding her statement to the contrary, to an ignorant Telemachus. 'Now that gives me the most sincere pleasure,' she continued. Her words, however, lacked the ring of enjoyment, and were uttered less with intention than the want of something to say ; the wind, in fact, had been taken out of her sails. 'What I feared was that at Mirbridge, where the girl had many friends—for she was a miracle of cunning and duplicity—you might have heard things to her advantage. Sir Richard's mother, poor thing, was utterly mistaken in her from the first.'

'I have every reason to believe it.'

'Then that makes what I thought it my duty to say quite easy, though not perhaps superfluous. There is a faction, I know, who have always persuaded themselves that the girl was a victim—a simple, innocent creature, redolent of catechism and bread and butter ; and, of course, if you had taken that view of the case, the truth would have given you pain. It was Sir Richard, my dear friend, who was the victim. I don't mean to say, indeed, that he had ever any intention of marrying her ; but it was not her fault that he did not do so. As I told poor Lady Trevor in this very room—with the girl sitting yonder, only just out of earshot—"In my opinion, you are doing a very dangerous thing in taking that young person out of her proper sphere, and throwing your son in the way of temptation ;" for, for one of her class, she was undeniably attractive, and had a certain innocence of manner—though, of course, it was only manner—calculated to deceive almost anyone. It never hoodwinked me, however, for one instant. I am a believer in race, and the sort of family she came from would have been enough to put me on my guard against her. I am afraid some of them are living in your neighbourhood still, but that can't be helped. In old times they would have been rooted out ; but in these days of democratic license nothing can be done in that way, I fear. Most fortunately, indeed, as we know, the unhappy girl died, and her offspring with her ; otherwise there is no knowing what would have happened, for poor Lady Trevor was so Quixotic in her views, and Sir Marmaduke—though in quite another way—so very queer, that it is impossible to say what they might not have done from a mistaken notion of reparation. Only conceive the position in which it would have placed us all, if Sir Richard had married the girl !'

'It would have been very embarrassing, no doubt.'

'Embarrassing! Embarrassing is no word for it! Such old friends as the Trevors and ourselves have ever been; and the impossibility of continuing our mutual relations! Imagine, too, if the child had grown up! With Royalty, and among very great families indeed, the thing, to be sure, is somehow found practicable; but among the ordinary aristocracy—if I may venture so to speak of you people at the Court—the existence of a nobody among somebodies could not have been tolerated. However, all's well that ends well. I should not, as I have said, have alluded to this painful subject but for the idea that I might have been useful to you in dispelling an illusion, but I am thankful to find it is not necessary to do so. You have discovered for yourself, it seems, what sort of person this girl really was.'

'I think so—yes.'

'And you are not annoyed with me for my plain speaking?'

'Not at all.'

'That is nice of you. Some people would have been offended. Good gracious! what is that dreadful woman going to do? Mrs. Westrop, you are surely not going out of doors?'

'Why not?' responded that lady coolly, stepping through the open window and beckoning to Miss Mumchance to follow her. 'There's a delicious smell of tobacco outside, and I am anxious to know where it comes from.'

'Tobacco!' exclaimed Lady Joddrell. She could not have been more shocked if she had been told the house was on fire. 'It must be the coachmen in the stables—no one can be so mad as to go out on the damp grass.'

But the natural desire to exchange the atmosphere of the drawing-room for that of the summer night had been awakened in many a fair bosom by the audacious widow's example, and one by one the ladies stepped out of the nearest window and joined the two deserters. It was like a stampede—though among highly-trained and pampered steeds indeed—in an Australian cattle-yard. Notwithstanding the feverish clutch with which Society hugs its gilded chains, its slavery is really hateful, except to the very dullest. How hateful it is, may be gathered from the eagerness with which anything in the way of naturalness—if it be but a Buffalo Bill—is welcomed. If fine folk had only a little more courage they would find life much more pleasant; but the few of them who have pluck are too often utterly reckless, and frighten the rest by their wild ways.

To Lady Trevor herself, stifled by the terrible restraint she had been under during the last ten minutes, the prospect of freedom and fresh air was like a glimpse of Heaven. She stole out alone, and crossed the terrace on to the lawn which lay beyond the reach of the lights from the house, so swiftly and so suddenly, that if anyone saw her, none followed. The coolness

above and beneath was unspeakably refreshing to her; the silence of the stars, contrasted with the drawing-room murmur from which she had just escaped, had a sense of sublimity for her she had not experienced for years.

'Great Heaven! is it worth while?' was the vague thought that flashed upon her mind, as she stood for an instant with her hand upon her bosom and her eyes fixed on the sky—a question that tens of thousands may well put to themselves. On the other hand, these moments of sublime enfranchisement are rare. The chord thus attuned to the celestial harmonies is too delicate for everyday use: it is only a very few of us who can live up to the music of the spheres Strange to say, it is generally the most selfish—your monks and anchorites—who accomplish it with least difficulty, and Lady Trevor was far from selfish. Even as that glimpse of freedom flashed upon her, she caught sight of a tall figure upon the terrace, with his back to the wall, smoking a cigar, who dispelled her dream for her.

'There is Hugh,' she sighed—not in recognition of him, but of the necessity which compelled her to play out her poor part in the life-drama for which she had engaged herself.

She sat down on one of the garden-seats that were placed about the tennis-ground, and, while the nightingale sang overhead, and all the air was scented with the cool perfumes of the night, watched his moody and isolated figure.

Presently she saw him move swiftly through the throng and join a girl who was standing apart from the others; she was in white, as many were, but even at that distance her shapely and imperial form towered unmistakably above the rest. It was Clara Thorne; and the two, after a few moments' talk, came slowly towards the tennis-ground. The hue of Lady Trevor's attire was dark, and even had they suspected her presence, she would not have been visible to them. She had no natural taste for eavesdropping, but the idea of any wrong-doing in thus being a secret witness to the meeting of the two young people never crossed her mind. There was no room in it, indeed, for any feeling save indignation against them; chiefly, of course, against the girl. It seemed to her that Clara had purposely separated herself from the rest that he might select her for his companion in the sight of the whole company, and that he had given way to the temptation. There was a reason, though locked within her own bosom, why she, of all women, had no right to blame him; there was a reason, too, why she should have regarded Clara's supposed conduct with more charity and tenderness, but this latter did not weigh with her. She only saw in the girl an obstacle to her wishes, and to the well-being of the son for whom she had sacrificed herself and her peace of mind.

Nearer and nearer they came, till stopped by the tennis-net, when they turned and faced one another, within a few feet of her as she sat in the shadow. Hugh had discarded his cigar—a tribute, as she well understood, not to politeness, but to passion—and was regarding his companion with a look of tenderness that all the maternal solicitude and devotion of a lifetime, as she bitterly reflected, had failed to evoke. 'My son is my son till he gets him a wife,' is a reflection that has pained many a mother's heart; but this woman, it was plain, had robbed her of her son before she had any right to call him her own. If Clara Thorne was conscious of this, however, she exhibited no sign of triumph, but returned the young man's amorous glances with her usual look of stately calm.

'You will drive me to do something reckless,' he said, in a tone of voice which contrasted curiously with his admiring gaze, 'if you are so cold and indifferent.'

'I am not indifferent, Hugh,' she answered quietly, 'though, fortunately, I am not so imprudent as yourself. What is it you want with me, which can be worth the risk you run in bringing me here?'

'I want a kiss,' he murmured passionately.

'A kiss!' she answered, with contemptuous scorn; 'upon my life, sir, you abuse a man's privilege of being selfish. Is it possible that you can have been so mad?'

'Mad? Yes, I am mad for love of you—a thing any girl ought to be proud of. What do I care what all these people may think of me?'

'For an instant—if it be within your power, sir,' she answered, in harsh, metallic tones, 'put yourself out of the question and think of *me*. It is possible that you may find some young lady yonder, who, to give you a moment's pleasure, is ready to sacrifice her whole future for you, but be assured that I am not of that class. You have brought me here, and hazarded what is dearest and most valuable to me, upon false pretences, sir. How *dared* you do it?'

Her large eyes flashed fire as she spoke; her smooth white hands were clenched; her satined foot came down on the dry turf with an audible thud.

'It is splendid acting,' thought the invisible spectator of this little scene, 'but she is overdoing it. Hugh will never stand that.' She was speaking, however, only from her own experience—as a mother.

'I really did want to say something to you,' he stammered humbly, 'only—damme, you're such a termagant—you have driven it out of my head.'

'It must have been very important; perhaps you wanted me to run away with you?' she inquired simply.

'Now, upon my life and honour, my darling, that was the very thing it was,' he responded earnestly.

She laughed a soft, contemptuous laugh, as musical in its way as the 'jug-jug' of the nightingale above them, whom their voices, as usual, had roused to emulation.

'No, it wasn't,' she answered quietly, 'though it is likely enough some such mad idea has at one time or another crossed your mind. Be so good as to dismiss it for ever. If I do marry you, it will be in Mirbridge Church, and with the full consent of your mother—Hush, what's that?'

'A rabbit in the flower-bed.' Lady Trevor had clasped her hands mechanically in heartfelt thankfulness. 'It will be difficult, but the Mater will do anything for me.'

'Then in the meantime do not make it impossible. Go back, sir, at once, and make yourself agreeable to Viola; you have neglected her shamefully all the evening.'

'Or what do you say to Miss Mumchance?' he inquired, half menacingly.

'That would be too transparent; moreover, your brother has already bespoken her.'

'My brother! What chance would he have against *me*?'

The speaker's vanity and dislike were both aroused.

'Every chance. Miss Mumchance can choose where she likes.'

There was an unconscious bitterness in her tone that did not escape him, notwithstanding his self-centred thoughts.

'Then if I were not the elder son, perhaps you would choose my brother?' he put in savagely.

She shrugged her white shoulders ever so little.

'Charlie is not much in my line,' she said composedly; 'it seems to me you are easily made jealous.'

'And you?'

He looked at her in his grim fashion, which was the hardest for her to bear in all his *répertoire* of ugly looks. For an instant she lost her colour—but not through fear—murmured 'Coward!' under her breath, then answered, smiling:

'Try me with Viola. Go back at once, not my way, but another.'

He growled like some wild beast in a menagerie, who nevertheless obeys the whip and takes the hoop, and turned to do her bidding.

'Since you are so obedient, you may have One, sir.'

He would have clasped her to his breast, but her strong white arm, like a bar of steel, forbade it. Her smooth round cheek had not a trace of colour in it, nor her eye a gleam of lovelight, as he took his guerdon; such evidences of emotion she well knew would have been thrown away upon him, and she did not trouble herself to simulate them. Perhaps her hold upon him was all the stronger on that account.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MRS. WESTROP'S VIEW.

Not a look, not a word that had passed between the young people during their stolen interview had been lost upon Lady Trevor; and after it was over, she sat awhile in her leafy solitude, notwithstanding the speculations her absence from the company might create, to ponder over it. The confession of her son's love for Clara Thorne had not surprised her; she had known it—though she had not suspected the passionate intensity of it, of which she had not indeed even thought him capable—for weeks; nor did it much astonish her that it was not returned. Scanty as had been her opportunities for observation, she had made up her mind that Clara's affection for Hugh was feigned. But that only made her determination to be his wife the more formidable. She understood for the first time the resolute character of the girl with whom she had to deal; one neither to be frightened nor cajoled, and armed at all points for the contest in which she was engaged by Nature herself.

For a moment, with the recollection of that incarnation of Force and Beauty before her eyes, Lady Trevor shrank from a struggle which, from her own experience of mankind, she felt could have but one end.

Suppose Hugh married her! There would be no fear of her not sustaining his position in the county; she would hold her own—and something more—against all comers. But would she be content with such a sovereignty? To such a woman's ambition there would probably be no bounds; and from her keen eyes would it be possible to conceal the secret which, once possessed by her, would place her mother-in-law at her feet? What an end to all her own scheming and planning would it be to find herself the slave of Clara Thorne! Notwithstanding the sense of her past shame, which was far stronger than that of her present wrong-doing, Lady Trevor had a pride of her own, though of a different kind, that could have matched with that of the Chief Baroness herself. No; whatever necessity might arise for self-abasement, her neck should never be bowed to such a yoke as that. Defeat she might suffer, but not submission; and why even defeat?

'If I do marry you it will be at Mirbridge Church,' the girl had said; 'and with your mother's full consent.' That this was no empty vaunt she felt, and she took some comfort from it. Hugh had given it no reply, imagining, doubtless, that his doting mother would refuse him nothing; but he would find her stubborn at least on one point.

It was significant of the keenness of Clara's observation that

she had not even alluded to Sir Richard, who, in truth, would care nothing as to whom his elder son might take to wife; though he, too, would probably object to a daughter-in-law found close to his door and likely to remain there. There was another crumb of comfort which would have escaped a less vigilant eye: Lady Trevor had noticed Clara's change of colour when Hugh had charged her with being of a jealous disposition; and—strange unction, indeed, for a mother to lay to her anxious breast—the thought that Hugh would be likely to give any girl cause for jealousy was consolatory to her.

Behind that calm and stately mask there lay, perhaps, passions that might work for good—that is, for Hugh's good. As for any remonstrance with Hugh himself, she felt she might as well have appealed to the east wind: if he was to be saved from the spell that had been cast upon him, it must be by the enchantress herself. Bitter indeed was the reflection that all her own care and devotion to him would count for nothing in the coming struggle, and that his fate lay in the soft white palm of a girl who but a few weeks ago had been a stranger to him. This is a reflection, indeed, that must more or less occur to all mothers. But Lady Trevor had not only her son to watch over, but her secret.

When she returned to the house, she had the advantage of one coming from darkness into light, and joined the company as far from the spot where her hostess was stationed as possible. Lady Joddrell still sat at one of the windows of her drawing-room, surrounded by a faithful few, in silent protest against the defection of her truant guests, so that she at least could not have missed her from the terrace. She mixed with the nearest group without exciting any comment, and began to flatter herself that her absence had been unobserved; but in this she was mistaken.

'My *dear* Lady Trevor, where *have* you been?' broke in Mrs. Westrop's sharp voice in the midst of her self-congratulations. 'What have you been doing out in the Chief Baroness's preserves yonder?' And she pointed in the direction of the tennis-ground. 'Not poaching, I do hope; though, indeed, you look quite young enough.'

'Poaching! What do you mean?' answered Lady Trevor stiffly.

She really did not know what Mrs. Westrop meant; but any allusion to the misdemeanour in question was naturally distasteful to her; it was like talking of ropes to the belongings of one who has been hanged.

'Come, come, you must learn to take my little jokes in good part. I was alluding to the way in which some of our young gentlemen are taking advantage of their unexpected enfranchisement. It is quite surprising how many of our finest birds

—I mean our prettiest girls—are missing. Your son, for example—whom I particularly wanted to get hold of for his own good——'

'You are very kind. Hugh is yonder, and quite alone.'

'Yes, but he hasn't been long alone,' was the dry rejoinder. 'However, it is not your elder, but your younger son that I am in search of. What a *very* nice young fellow he is; *so* handsome—"a sight to make an old man young," as the poets say, but much more an old woman. Dear me, I wish I was twenty again, for his sake.'

'I am sure I should have no objection,' said Lady Trevor, laughing.

'No, I'm sure you wouldn't, for then I was an heiress,' laughed Mrs. Westrop, not very merrily, yet without bitterness, too, for she was a philosopher in her way. 'Let me tell you something in confidence.' Here she drew Lady Trevor apart from the party on the terrace, as it was now easy to do. 'Well, there's another heiress for him, if he only chooses to play his cards properly.'

'This is news indeed,' answered the other, in an indifferent tone.

'I am perfectly serious; and I should like to do your boy, who has won my old heart, a good turn. I keep my word, and am not one to turn my back upon my friends, I assure you.'

'Nor upon your enemies either, as I have heard,' said Lady Trevor, smiling.

'Well, that is true, too. By-the-bye, I saw Lady Joddrell in close confab with you a while ago, and can guess, I think, by her starched look, what she was talking to you about. She has only one expression that tells what is going on in her mind, and that's a bad one; otherwise she is a doll stuffed with sawdust. She was telling you the story of Letty Beeton, was she not?' In spite of her self-command Lady Trevor started with surprise, then gravely inclined her head. The keenness of her companion's observation not only astonished, but alarmed her. Her part with Lady Joddrell had been difficult enough to play; but to talk about herself with this woman without discovery would, she foresaw, require all her wits. 'Of course it is not a pleasant subject,' continued Mrs. Westrop, taking note of the other's gravity, 'but there are two ways of looking at it, and I'll answer for it, it is the worse side that has been presented to you. I take it for granted that at this time of day you are not so foolish as to cherish animosity against a young girl who died a quarter of a century ago, because your husband once fell in love with her.'

'Certainly not.'

'Of course not. None but a soured woman, who ought by

rights to have been an old maid, would do so. The fact is, the whole affair, or at least most of it, did your husband great credit.'

'Lady Joddrell certainly did not put it in that way,' said Lady Trevor quietly; 'but she laid most of the blame on—on——' she hesitated; to mention her own name was difficult to her.

'On the young person,' put in Mrs. Westrop quickly. 'I have no doubt that is what she called her in discussing her delinquencies. Well, that is not true either, for as you and I are well aware, whatever lies it may suit the world to tell, it is the man who is in these cases most to blame. She was a very good girl, was Letty Beeton.'

'I cannot think that,' said Lady Trevor, with a sigh which she could not control.

'Well, well; I speak as girls go. From all I have ever heard about the matter, I should say that with the same chances she would have turned out better, upon the whole, than any girl that is here to-night. The poor thing never had a chance from the first, except the one that was her ruin.' It was amazing to the last degree to Lady Trevor to hear herself thus championed, and, of course, it was not displeasing. Her heart warmed towards this strange old woman, who, from whatever cause, was defending her memory from cruel aspersion; but on the other hand, she did not lose sight of the character of the speaker. Mrs. Westrop was as worldly in her way, as she well knew, as Lady Joddrell in hers; and entertained less severe views of morality. 'Why I defend Letty Beeton to you,' continued Mrs. Westrop, 'is because I wish you to understand that your husband did not disgrace himself by not wanting to marry her—for, mind you, he did want to marry her. She didn't fish for him, as Lady Joddrell has been telling you, but succumbed to his promises and protestations, which, in their turn, were made in all sincerity. I again say that so far—and leaving the unfortunate catastrophe out of the question—the transaction did him credit. For my part—and since the girl is dead, and all this happened before you knew him, I may say it without offence—I think it would have been an excellent thing if he *had* married her.'

'You are not really serious, Mrs. Westrop?'

'Yes, I am. In the first place it would have been a slap in the face to the county, which is always half asleep, and wants waking up; and secondly, I believe she would have made him a good wife. She was beautiful, though I dare say not better-looking than *you* were at her age—and if not so highly cultivated, at all events better *educated* than any of these young women' (her arm, covered with bracelets, here made a sweep, intended to comprehend the whole company); 'she had force of character (though she broke down so lamentably where she

shouldn't), and that is just what Sir Richard wanted—I mean when he was a young man,' she added, with ludicrous precipitancy. 'It is my experience that most young men are weak, and *all* old men. In the latter case, however, only as regards the fair sex; poor Mrs. Mumchance (my heiress's mother) was indeed of a different opinion, but her husband's case was exceptional; he had no pleasures of his own (though he lived by supplying them to other people, and between ourselves was an arrant cheat) beyond his bottle. "My dear," she used to say, for I permitted her great familiarity for reasons of my own, "you may say what you like, *but of the two*, drunkenness in a husband is the worse vice; the other does come to an end sooner or later, but *that* lasts for ever." Now, what do *you* say?'

'I am happy to say, Mrs. Westrop, that I am not in a position to give an opinion on either point,' replied Lady Trevor gravely.

'Really? You astonish me. At the same time that corroborates my view about Letty Beeton. If Sir Richard had married her, my belief is he would have settled down, and they would have been the happiest pair in the county. They wouldn't have been visited, for one thing—an immense advantage in itself, but to him especially gratifying! I never saw a man look so bored by society as your husband.'

'He is very far from well,' said Lady Trevor softly.

'I am sorry for that. He doesn't *look* well, poor man. Smokes too much, I should say. So did my dear fellow; but then he did everything he shouldn't have done besides. Now if anything should happen to your husband——'

'For Heaven's sake, Mrs. Westrop, do not talk of such a thing,' interrupted Lady Trevor, greatly agitated.

'*Really?* Well, now, that's beautiful—quite an idyll. "John Anderson, my Joe, John," and all the rest of it; it shows how just is my view, since you two are Darby and Joan, of what would have happened if he had married his first love. I'm glad I've talked to you about her; it will give you a still greater respect for Sir Richard. Now you must go to the Chief Baroness, who is looking very hard at us, and wondering how you can talk to an odious woman like me; and I must go and get back to my heiress, whom I have lent to your son.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

TWO COUPLES.

A GREAT deal of our drama, it must be confessed, is carried on in one scene, namely, at Catesby Hall; but this is not for the same reason as would be justly ascribed to it on the stage, namely, cheapness—it is really quite a natural proceeding. If any male reader be inclined to carp at what may seem to be a

too protracted account of Lady Joddrell's dinner-party and what occurred there, let him ask any young lady of his acquaintance who lives in the country, and she will point out his error. Entertainments of this kind are the epochs of social life, during which almost everything happens that is worth mentioning; they are often the only opportunities that folks are offered of seeing one another at all, and they naturally make the most of them. In these cases are found the dates from which the most important events of many young lives are reckoned. Miss Viola Joddrell, for one, had been vaguely, but hopefully, looking forward to her mother's dinner-party for weeks; only, unfortunately, it was not fated to be marked for her either with a white stone or otherwise, because her lines had fallen in an arid place, *i.e.*, next to Mr. Hugh Trevor. She pronounced him, not without reason, if but with little zoological accuracy, to be a Polar bear. Rarely had any young lady been worse treated.

Statty, as her sister Anastasia was termed, had not been much more fortunate; for though she had found her neighbour at table—Mr. Gurdon—an agreeable one, her instinct had informed her that he was only one of those young men at best who are forced to be 'the summer pilot of an empty heart unto the shores of Nothing.' People who knew her could have been found, no doubt, to ascribe this to her own fault, because the organ in question *was* empty; but in any case I fear Mr. Gurdon's attentions to young ladies generally might be described, in the words of the dramatist, as, 'though strictly honourable, remote.' Art was his mistress, and a jealous one, for having 'found him poor, she kept him so,' so that it was out of his power to gratify a more legitimate passion. There are many such young fellows, not only in his profession, whom Celibacy seems to have marked for her own from the very first—pleasant, good-humoured, tender-hearted to ladies, fond of children (other people's children), and devoted to ladies' society, but bachelors born. Though to young persons of the other sex these may seem in youth to be useless members of society, they become in mature years its greatest benefactors; they develop into benevolent uncles, entertain the most paternal feelings towards all good girls, and after death often cut up unexpectedly well. Such men have generally great self-respect, but with such little self-assertion that foolish persons sometimes try to 'put upon' them, with the most unexpected results. One case I call to mind involved (to the putter on) a passage through the air down a steep flight of stairs in one of the most frequented clubs in London. I don't think I ever saw a gentleman—with a rose in his button-hole, and otherwise faultlessly attired—so exceedingly astonished.

'Fight him; no,' was the dry rejoinder to the cartel of

defiance which followed upon this incident; 'but I'll *kick* him again wherever I find him.'

Peaceful but resolute persons of this kind are the salt of the earth, and the terror of swash-bucklers, and Robert Gurdon was one of them. He had been one of the last to light his cigar in the dining-room, from commiseration for his youthful host. But, when that young gentleman himself joined the ranks of rebellion, he no longer hesitated to do the like; moreover, since he had himself no guests to attend to, he presently slipped into the garden with Charles Trevor, who, 'no sooner out, was taken by the watch,' in the person of Mrs. Westrop, who, with her shadow, the heiress, had been waiting for him.

'Mary Anne and I are much in want of a couple of cavaliers,' she said, and at once seized upon Mr. Gurdon as her own lawful prey. She was, indeed, a very suitable companion to him, being lively, full of fun, and naturally without any serious expectations (from which he always shrank) as regarded himself. But she was too modest in her estimate of her own charms, and too ready to assist young people in what she took it for granted must be the desire of their souls (namely, flirtations) to retain him; and presently, seeing Lucy Thorne standing alone and, to say truth, feeling a little deserted—she nudged his arm, and whispering, 'There, take *her*,' took herself off, and left them to their own devices.

Never did good-natured scheme more completely miss its mark; for Lucy did not covet Mr. Gurdon's company in the least, and Mr. Gurdon was well aware of it. Since she could not have Charlie, she would rather have been alone, and suffer the torture of hearing him make himself agreeable to Miss Mumchance. She had complete confidence in his fidelity, and understood that what he was doing was done for the most prudential reasons, and, in fact, for her own sake; but it was torture to her, nevertheless. She had heard more than one allusion to the favour he had found with the heiress; and though she had said to herself, 'How little they know him!' it was certain that that young lady was not indisposed to welcome his attentions. What was worse than all—though that too, as she kept insisting upon in her own mind, was only his way with everybody—he had showed no unwillingness to pay them. She really pitied the poor girl, who was only too likely, in her ignorance of his genial nature, to take him *au sérieux;* but she still more pitied herself. No one had hitherto taken much notice of her, for she was only a parson's daughter, and did not possess that surpassing beauty which, in her sister's case, attracted all men's eyes, and filled all women's hearts with hopeless envy. The dowagers had nodded at her good-naturedly; one or two of them had even extended to her that left hand of friendship, their

patronage; but the girls rather fought shy of her; they wanted to talk of Clara Thorne, but not to her sister.

Under such circumstances, and deprived by adverse fate of the society of her lover, it might have been thought that the companionship of a pleasant young fellow, whom she really liked, would have been welcome to her; but she had not the heart for it; she wanted to be alone with melancholy. In vain Mr. Gurdon did his best to amuse her; narrated with no little humour the story of the revolution in the dining-room, and hit off with happy touches Sir Richard, Mr. Lascelles, and the M.F.H. There was no reciprocity; and for all his pains he received only paper money—a forced smile in payment. Even when he talked of her father, a topic which always aroused her enthusiasm, she evinced only a languid interest. At last he ventured upon a subject which he had hitherto purposely avoided, namely, Charlie himself. He was quite aware of that young gentleman's devotion to her, but also that it was for the present esoteric and to be ignored. In despair, however, he made a passing allusion to him, and her pale face rayed forth at once like a Catherine-wheel to which the match has been applied. For a young man to find that the only way of making himself agreeable to a pretty girl is by eulogizing another young man is not a position flattering to self-esteem, but Mr. Gurdon was good-nature personified. He was as ready to talk of those he liked as most people are to talk of themselves; and to give pleasure to others was one of his highest enjoyments. In a few minutes he had completely won her ear, and a superficial observer would have concluded that he had gained possession of her altogether. Mrs. Thorne, passing by with a prim dowager, had her attention significantly drawn to the fact that 'The party from Mirbridge seemed to be *very* independent of outside society.'

She knew that there was little truth in this as regarded Mr. Gurdon, but with the knowledge that Clara and Hugh Trevor were neither to be found upon the terrace—a circumstance which annoyed her very much—she was not in a position to combat the remark. Lucy, too, had observed her sister's absence—the disappearance of so prominent a figure could, indeed, hardly escape the notice of anyone—and had only too well guessed its cause. There was a worse thing, she admitted to herself, even than being ignored by one's lover, namely, his making one too conspicuous.

'I like Miss Mumchance,' observed Mr. Gurdon. Engaged as that young lady apparently was in confidential talk with Charlie, it was only natural that she should have suggested herself to him as a topic of conversation, through the association of ideas; but somehow it seemed that any wandering from the beloved object was displeasing to his companion,

'Indeed,' she answered, with chill indifference, and then, apparently with an effort, but with some curiosity in her tone nevertheless, 'may I ask why?'

'Well, I don't exactly know; but she seems to have no nonsense about her.'

'Why *should* she have any nonsense about her?' inquired Lucy with indignation.

'Because she has three hundred thousand pounds.'

That simple rejoinder, or rather his quiet way of uttering it, silenced the girl. She well knew that the possession of great wealth is apt to give people airs. The poet may inquire contemptuously, 'Why, in the name of glory, are they proud?' or wish to be informed whether 'red-lined accounts are richer than the songs of Grecian years?' But as a matter of fact, though it may be difficult to say why, unless it is because of their great luck in getting their money, and yet escaping the gallows, very rich people generally are proud. Mr. Gurdon's mere statement of fact had for Lucy, therefore, the nature of a reproof. She really believed that Miss Mumchance was an unaffected girl, and that under the circumstances it was very creditable to her; only seeing her on such good terms with Charlie, she had been tempted to deprecate her. If she had been within earshot of the young couple she must needs have acknowledged that she had not much ground for jealousy.

At first they discussed the people about them, including, of course, the lady who had introduced them to one another.

'What a charming old lady Mrs. Westrop is,' said Charlie.

'Very, and as kind as she is clever,' answered the heiress with enthusiasm. 'You have no idea how easy she is to get on with.'

'You seem indeed to pull together capitally,' he answered, smiling at this unnecessary defence; 'but if yoked with some one of a less sympathetic and good-natured disposition, I can fancy her being a little masterful.'

'She likes to have her own way, no doubt—most of us do, don't you think so?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' he answered innocently; 'you get it, but in so pleasing a fashion that we are not aware of your tyranny.'

'That is very pretty; but I was speaking generally, and quite as much of men as women, sir.'

'But even then I don't know anything about having one's way,' he answered demurely; 'I am a younger son, you see.'

'I know it, but I don't see it,' she said, laughing. 'You seem to me to be, at all events, independent enough.'

'But that is unfortunately just what I am not,' he replied a little grimly.

'I did not mean that sort of independence,' she said, with a

touch of irritation, and perhaps of disappointment. 'It seems so hard that everybody *will* talk to me about money. I was in hopes—I don't know why—that you would not do it.'

'I am so sorry,' he murmured penitently. He was sincerely sorry he had annoyed her; yet somehow pleased with her for being annoyed.

'Of course it's very foolish of me,' she went on, after a little pause; 'it is better, I suppose, to be the golden calf than a calf of the ordinary kind, and I am well aware that but for my reputed wealth no one would take the slightest notice of me.'

'Forgive me for contradicting you, Miss Mumchance,' he answered gravely, 'but as regards one person at least, that is certainly not true. If you were Mrs. Westrop's companion instead of, as she calls you, her heiress, I should have formed precisely the same high opinion of you which I venture to entertain at present.'

'Would you really?' she replied, and there was gratitude as well as wonder in her tone. 'Upon my word, I am half inclined to believe you; but then, you see, I have been prejudiced in your favour by Mrs. Westrop; she says you are so truthful.'

'She must be a good judge of character,' said Charlie demurely.

'She is; she says I am ignorant, and by no means brilliant; that one would not look twice at me if it were not for my diamonds; and that in place of determination of purpose I have only a certain obstinacy, which will some day bring me to grief.'

'And will she not allow you a single virtue?'

'Well, she says I am not quite so egotistic as might have been expected.'

'And I think under the circumstances that is very creditable to you,' said Charlie gravely.

'Her very phrase! I forgot to put in "under the circumstances,"' sighed Miss Mumchance. 'It is something, I suppose, to be told one is not wholly wrapped up in self; otherwise, since to observe is to be amused, to take an interest in one's fellow-creatures does not strike me as so very meritorious.'

'You observe, then, do you?' inquired Charlie mechanically. It seemed so hard that he should have to make conversation with this young woman, when there was another one only a few feet off to whom it would have flowed so pleasantly, and without an effort.

'Yes, I do, sir. I observe, for example, that you are very *distrait*, and find it difficult to listen to me; also that you cast impatient glances in the direction of your friend Mr. Gurdon.'

'I do assure you I was not thinking of Mr. Gurdon,' exclaimed Charlie, with much frankness.

'I didn't say you were,' she answered gravely; then in a

lighter tone, and with a significant smile, she added, 'Why don't you go and talk to her? You *may*.'

Charlie shook his head. 'That is just my difficulty,' he murmured, 'I mayn't; unless, indeed, you would be so very good as to go with me.'

'By all means.' She placed her glittering fingers on his arm, and pressed it ever so little. He never knew what he had lost in those last few minutes, but he felt that he had gained a friend. Something of what had happened Lucy had read in his face, and she welcomed Miss Mumchance with her sweetest smile. It would have been difficult to find a greater contrast than these two girls presented, the one of the ordinary good-natured type, not over-refined, whose pride of place was manifested by blazing jewels; the other a model of simple and retiring grace, with less of gold about her than a lily; yet they had one thing in common which each seemed to recognise in the other at once—a tender heart.

The four young people excited no more notice than any other group might have done, and Miss Mumchance, after a word or two with Lucy, gave her individual attention to Mr. Gurdon, thus affording the two lovers the first opportunity they had had that evening of saying a few words to one another.

'You seem to have been enjoying yourself, Charlie,' murmured Lucy, with just the least touch of reproach.

'I'm glad of that; I tried to give that impression, my darling, for your sake,' he answered demurely. 'I don't think anyone can have discovered our secret from my behaviour.'

There was a twinkle in his eye that would have extinguished her wrath, even if its flame had been fiercer.

'You're a very naughty boy. I believe you prefer amusing yourself to being serious, always; you have very nearly made me jealous.'

'I couldn't help it; she was making love to me all dinner-time.'

'For shame, sir!'

'She was, indeed; she only left me with her heiress as a blind.'

'But I am speaking of the heiress.'

'I thought you were speaking of Mrs. Westrop: Miss Mumchance is engaged.'

'What a story-teller you are!'

'She is, indeed—with Gurdon.'

'Why, she has never spoken to him before in her life.'

'Perhaps not; but see how they're getting on! Remember how *we* got on the first time I ever met you. It's a parallel case.'

Charlie Trevor's method of making love was, perhaps, a little peculiar; but his looks, which were tender and eager enough, made up for what seemed wanting to his conversation in the

way of sentiment: most girls, it is true, dislike 'the play' of passion; their feelings are not strong enough to stand any strain of ridicule; but Charlie's manner suited Lucy very well. After all, what does it signify what one says, if one says it to the right person, and it pleases her? They were as happy, these two, interchanging their love-talk, as was the Chief Baroness inveighing against the growing Bohemianism of the upper classes with some sympathizing and stately dame; or as Mr. Lascelles, who was holding forth to a brother magistrate upon the exaggerated value of allotments. It seemed to them that the evening must be only beginning, when the champing of bits and the crunching of wheels upon the gravel, on the other side of the house, gave warning that it was coming to an end.

Then Miss Mumchance exchanged a few words with Lucy, just to save appearances, but soon found that she should have liked to have prolonged them for her own sake.

'I wonder whether I might come over and see you at Mirbridge?' she inquired doubtfully.

'Well, of course,' put in Charlie confidently; 'it would be quite a charity.'

'I was speaking to Miss Lucy Thorne, sir, and not you,' said the heiress, with such a weight of dignity that her tone seemed to have all her three hundred thousand pounds upon it. 'I have no intention of going to the Court unless I am asked—and perhaps not even then—but I have ventured to invite myself to the Rectory.'

'My poor dear Gurdon!' whispered Charlie pitifully under his breath; but Lucy heard him, and could hardly muster voice to say:

'Indeed you would be a most welcome visitor, Miss Mumchance.'

'Then I will try to get Mrs. Westrop to drive me over.'

'Who is taking my name in vain?' inquired that lady, bustling up, not without an air of menace.

'I hope it will not be in vain,' said Lucy suavely; and then she repeated what Miss Mumchance had said to her.

'Well, in my opinion, it would be better you should come to *us*,' she answered, with a significant glance at Charlie. 'It's *her* carriage, and *her* horses, so I suppose she can do as she likes; but I don't think *I* shall come, Miss Lucy. Your father and mother have an idea that I am not quite respectable enough for them. Now, Mary Anne, let's get our cloaks; and see that nobody makes a snatch at your diamonds. From what Mr. Lascelles has been telling us, the landed interest is in a very depressed condition, and there's no knowing to what desperate shifts the gentlemen of the county may not be put.'

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. SMUG.

An admirable writer of our day, in enumerating the national blessings of the last fifty years, has referred to the extinction of Brimstone theology as being one of the chief things we have to be thankful for. It was certainly a very debased worship, inasmuch as it required two of the meanest feelings in human nature for its nourishment, and, curiously enough, considering the high spiritual claims of its professors, those of the most worldly kind. For, divested of that flood of words in which dogma is almost always served up—like flounders in *souchet*—selfishness and snobbism were its foundations. Selfishness, because he who held it derived satisfaction from the reflection that he and a handful of other people would be saved, while all the rest of the world would be damned; and snobbism, because he flattered himself that in attributing to his Creator what he knew to be cruel and unjust attributes, and acquiescing in them, he was currying favour with Him, exactly as the Uriah Heaps of social life defend the doings of the wicked in high places for their own advantage. This faith is really dead, but it has still many who profess it without believing in it, and the Rev. John Smug was one of them. In his youth he had known people who believed in it—'Pagans suckled in a creed outworn'—who were, if they had but known it, less Christian than their fabled Anti-Christ himself. There had been such people in his time even in Mirbridge. Sir Marmaduke himself had been one of them—occasionally. There had been a 'widow woman' in his own flock who had put out one eye of her only son to prevent his being drawn for the militia, and, as a consequence, into the mouth of Tophet, who had embraced its tenets, as may be imagined, with genuine fervour; but her pastor's faith was of a very mitigated sort. He was of a kindly nature, and could never have burnt his heretics, even if they had defeated him in controversy. Under the hard shell of his theology he was soft as a turtle, though, unlike that animal, he was unacquainted with the tables of the great. He had a little learning, and some knowledge of human nature, and upon the whole he was an honest man. His forefathers in the faith, while pocketing the money of the Trevors for their chapel, would have regarded with philosophy the fact that the family to whom they owed their bread were bound for perdition; but Mr. Smug was not convinced of this—though he thought them in danger—and if he had been it would have made him seriously uncomfortable.

When Sir Richard was a very young man, he had been his tutor; that is to say, he had come over to the Court and read

with him for a few hours a day, at his father's request, with the ulterior view of winning him over to the true faith, which Sir Marmaduke chanced to patronize at that time. Neither his teaching nor his ministrations had had much success, but he bore his pupil no grudge on that account. It is probable he had never been very sanguine about his proposed proselyte, and he was not angry now because Sir Richard never came near the chapel he continued to endow; upon the whole it was not to be expected, and there was some consolation in the fact that neither, after the first Sunday, had the baronet been seen in the parish church. When they met, it was always cordially on both sides; but their modes of life and ways of thought were far asunder indeed. There was the difference of station, too, unexpressed but understood, which, to the minister, made such meetings not wholly pleasant; for though presbyter may be 'priest writ large,' in one sense, it is writ small in another, and never rises, like rector and vicar, to equality with the squire. It was almost incredible, indeed, that Mr. Smug should present himself at the Court without invitation; yet one afternoon, not long after the dinner-party at Catesby Hall, he did so, and asked to see Sir Richard. Had his face been less grave or his voice less serious as he did so, it is possible that he would have had some difficulty in attaining his object; for the butler set his face against Dissent in all its forms, and was of the private opinion that if the minister of Zion Chapel had known his place he would have rung the back-door bell instead of the front one. Mr. Cadman's taste for catastrophes, however, was too strong, and the minister's appearance too obviously that of a messenger of evil tidings, to permit of his being refused admittance upon any of those grounds of which butlers always have such a plentiful supply on hand.

Yes, master was in, and would Mr. Smug kindly take a seat in the hall while his presence was announced. The visitor did so, and a very incongruous figure he looked in that stately place. He had selected, not so much from natural humility as because he was a little man, a low oaken settle used by children, when there were any at the Court, and, leaning forward with his chin resting upon a huge cotton umbrella, regarded the polished floor with cheerless gaze. It reflected, almost like a mirror, a thin ascetic face, surmounted by 'a few last sad gray hairs'—eloquent of patience under failure. The thin lips moved earnestly, though dumbly, as if in reminiscence of public prayer. They were rehearsing what he was about to say—not, indeed, on any theological subject, but on one equally grave, and which might have almost as portentous issues.

The objects of interest which surrounded him, though they were many, and might have set a more worldly nature thinking

of the inequalities of human life, did not attract his attention in the least: he might have been visiting a labourer's cottage with brick floor and plaster walls, as far inferior to his own humble residence as Mirbridge Court was superior to it, for that matter. His mission was of too serious and unpleasant a nature to permit his thoughts to wander from it to external matters. Yet now and again they did wander, in spite of himself, to the far-back time when he had last been in that very hall awaiting his summons to Sir Marmaduke's chamber upon a matter not, alas! altogether different. It had been the afternoon of that day when the son and heir had gone forth from the Court in disgrace, Mr. Smug never knew whither. The Baronet had sent for his spiritual adviser to 'wrestle with him in prayer,' as he had expressed it. Not much of comfort had come of it to the hard, regenerate, half-Pagan old man; while the course of conduct which Mr. Smug had ventured to point out to him as the path of duty had been rejected. But the interview had been an event in the minister's undramatic and commonplace life not likely to be forgotten. He had been summoned to it by Lady Trevor herself—her pale and troubled face was now, as in life, before his eyes—and besought to use what influence he had on the side of mercy and forgiveness to both offenders. He remembered with admiration how she pleaded for the young girl more vehemently even than for her son—a Christian woman to the core, notwithstanding that she leaned to the errors of Prelacy.

Suddenly a hand was lightly laid upon his shoulder, and a gentle voice, yet one, as it struck him, used to the accents of command, observed:

'I hear you wish to see my husband, Mr. Smug.'

He hastily rose from the settle, but with only a dim perception of what had happened; it seemed to him like a continuation of his dream, or a repetition of it; and it was some moments before he recognised the fact that it was the living Lady Trevor who was addressing him. He had spoken to her but once—in her pony-carriage, with Mrs. Thorne beside her, which had added to the embarrassment of the interview—but, of course, he had seen her many times. He had a prejudice against her, as being a French woman, and consequently, as he imagined, allied to Popery; but he did not feel this now—the errand he had come upon forbade it. He only saw in her a woman and a mother.

The sadness and pity which overspread his face as he recognised her, cast their shadow at once upon her own.

'I trust there is nothing the matter?' she murmured apprehensively. 'If there be, I must ask you to disclose it to me, and not to Sir Richard. He is not in a state of health to hear bad news.'

This statement was a most unwelcome one to the poor preacher. He had come on an unpleasant mission, which would have been painful enough to reveal to anyone concerned with it, even of his own sex, much more so to one to whom he was under great obligations, and whom it must necessarily pain and distress. Between man and man, however, there is nothing that cannot be said when duty demands it, but to have to tell his sad story to a woman was, with all his sense of the responsibilities of his sacred office, a task from which Mr. Smug shrank in alarm. Moreover, though he doubtless flattered himself that it was not so, the social position of this particular woman, so gracious of air, and whose attire to his unaccustomed eyes spoke of sumptuousness and splendour, made the ordeal much more trying than if she had been of his own rank in life.

'There is no immediate hurry, Lady Trevor,' he stammered; then, with a sudden prick of conscience, added, 'at least, I hope not. Perhaps another day——'

She shook her head decisively.

'I am sorry to say my husband's malady is not of a passing nature. Any shock at any time might be most harmful. Kindly come into my private room,' and, with a gesture that had imperiousness in it as well as grace, she pointed to the door and led the way.

As it happened, it was the same little room in which he had been wont to give instruction to young Richard. Tutor and pupil had been accustomed to breakfast there together, and the latter still remembered with wonder how on one occasion, when there chanced to be some cold bacon on the table, with a little carpet of meat projecting from it, which had been cut down upon but not into, that Mr. Smug had cut off that rejected slip, with his slice, and eaten it. The trivial circumstance had impressed upon his boyish mind, for the first time, the difference of station between Methodists (among whom Mr. Smug was loosely catalogued) and other people, and perhaps—for boys are extremely 'snobbish'—tended to diminish the benefits he derived from his teaching. The pedagogue had been quite unconscious of the solecism he had committed, but it was curious that in that very room he should have introduced his business by laying stress on this same inferiority of position to Richard's wife.

'It is probably not unknown to you, Lady Trevor,' he began, as soon as they were both seated, 'that the ministration of persons of my faith is more confined to people in humble life than is the case with the teachers of the Established Church, and it is for this reason, doubtless, that a circumstance has come to my knowledge which has doubtless escaped the attention of Mr. Thorne, who would otherwise have been the proper person to have informed you of it. I wish from the bottom of my heart that

the task in question had fallen to him and not to me, and you will understand that I am only constrained to undertake it by an overpowering sense of duty.'

Lady Trevor gravely inclined her head in silence; his conversation had put her more at ease than she had felt at first. What he had come to speak about was probably only some misdoings in the parish, to which he thought it right to call the Squire's attention.

'There is a family not well thought of in the village, and among whom there have been some black sheep, of the name of Beeton.'

The colour rushed at once to Lady Trevor's face, then, ebbing like a wave, left her as pale as death. Her apprehensions then, always taking one unhappy direction, had only been too well grounded; her shameful secret was in danger from a new and unexpected quarter; once more she had to be armed at all points, and on her guard.

'I have heard of them,' she answered in low tones; 'Sir Richard has told me all.'

'I supposed so, madam,' answered the minister gravely, 'and it was very right of him so to do. What is done cannot be undone, and it is better to make a clean breast of it. It is the attribute of God, we hope, especially after years of penitence, to forgive such sins, and the duty of our fellow-creatures to forget them. I came here with no intention of touching on so old a wound. These Beetons, though some of them have been little credit to it, belong to my scanty flock.'

Lady Trevor knew that her father and brother had so belonged—not that either of them had had a 'call' in any particular religious direction (indeed, quite the contrary), but because chapel-goers, as a rule, are antagonistic to squires and parsons, and they had therefore thrown in their lot with Zion. She remarked, however, 'Indeed!' as though the fact was new to her.

'Yes. John Beeton, though in truth he is little better than a castaway, I fear, is still nominally in the fold, and it is consequently my duty to visit him, however unwelcome may be my presence. It is by this means that I have become acquainted with the sad matter that has brought me hither.'

Even now she could not guess what was her visitor's errand; it could hardly, indeed—considering the almost cursory manner in which he had referred to her husband's intrigue with Lucy Beeton—be connected with her secret, but that it was something serious and deplorable was evident from the minister's look and tone.

'I have said,' he continued, 'that some of the Beetons have been black sheep; old Roger Beeton was such, and so is John, his son; and his daughter Letty—though you may have heard

worse of her than she deserved—was, it must be confessed, poor girl, a backslider; but against others of the family there is no such record. There is one member of it, the young girl Jenny, for example, of whom scandal itself has nothing to say. To me, in truth, it has been a wonder how from such a stock, and with no one to look after her moral well-being, she has grown up so good and pure. She is engaged to an honest young fellow, the son of your housekeeper, Mrs. Grange, as you perhaps have heard.'

'I have also seen the girl herself,' observed Lady Trevor; 'she struck me both as pretty and modest.'

'No honest person can deny it, madam! If there is any attempt to persuade you that she is not modest—however self-interest may incline you to believe such slanderers—you may take my word for it, as a humble disciple of my Master, that they lie.'

'"Self-interest," and "incline to believe slanderers!" I do not understand you, Mr. Smug.'

Her words were bold, but her voice had a false ring in it, though not to the ears which it addressed. The mother's heart—with its wide experience of human life, and secret distrust of the object of its idolatry—had a foreboding of what was coming.

'Lady Trevor, I am only doing the duty which One far above us both has laid upon me, and you must forgive my plain speaking. I can well believe that, to one like yourself, the temptations of the poor are even less known than their sorrows. It may seem incredible to you that what are the joys—and the legitimate joys—of parents in your rank in life, such as the beauty of their daughters, for example, may to them be cares, and the cause of terrible misfortunes. You do not understand, I hope, that there are men in your class who look upon women in ours—for I am of the same humble origin as my flock—as mere toys to be played with, and flung away, when they are tired of them, into the gutter. It shocks you, as I perceive, to hear it; nevertheless, it is so. I warned you that this was a matter for your husband's ear rather than for yours. Is it your wish that I should go on?'

She bowed her head in acquiescence, but also in humiliation and unutterable distress of mind. The notice which Hugh had bestowed upon Jenny in the housekeeper's room recurred to her memory with painful distinctness. This girl was her own niece; she herself was her proper guardian, and her only one. Was it possible that Hugh had wronged her!

'He can never be so wicked or so mad!' she exclaimed involuntarily.

'Far be it from me, madam, to assert that your son—for I see you have guessed my errand—is one of those wretches whom I

have described,' continued the preacher pitifully; 'he may be thoughtless and not reckless; but the end of Jenny would be equally disastrous in either case, and I am here—at all hazards, and by all means—to save her.'

'You have done quite right, sir—but that of course,' cried Lady Trevor, rising from her chair and holding out both her hands to her visitor. 'I am indebted to you more than I ever can repay. You cannot, however, expect me to accept so serious—nay, so infamous—a charge against my own flesh and blood for granted. What proof have you——'

'The testimony of my own eyes,' he put in quietly. 'I have seen him walking with her in the spinney close to the cottage where she lives. Moreover, being fearful of the violence of her father, should he come to hear of these unwelcome attentions, and naturally shrinking from informing her betrothed of them, she has confided her trouble to my ear. When her father is away, and her lover engaged at his occupation elsewhere, Mr. Hugh Trevor pesters her with his company.'

'When does this happen?'

'On most days. He is probably with her now. I cannot say that I deplore his chastisement; but beside the danger which, despite her good principles and honest nature, the girl may be thus exposed to, there is, of course, the risk of discovery by her natural protectors, in which case there might be bloodshed.'

'Bloodshed!' The word struck home as no other of his words had done, though some had moved her deeply. The personal danger of her son—so doting was her love for him—affected her more than the peril in which his honour stood. Hitherto, since the girl, it seemed certain, gave him no encouragement, she had shrunk from immediate interference with him—nay, was hesitating up to this last moment as to whether his father or herself should tax him with his ill-conduct on his return home, knowing, at the same time, in her heart of hearts, it would not be Sir Richard; but now she felt that not one moment was to be lost.

'Mr. Smug,' she cried, 'I will at once take such measures that this disgraceful business shall at least proceed no further. The Beetons live at the Spinney Cottage, I believe. I will go myself and see this girl.'

'That is a resolution that does you credit. Permit me, however, to remind you, madam,' observed the minister drily, 'that it is not the girl who is in fault.'

'I know it. I am not so ignorant of life as you imagine,' she said with a quick flush; then added earnestly, 'Be assured that you have not come hither in vain, Mr. Smug. A thousand thanks. May I put myself under one more obligation in asking you to keep this matter a secret between ourselves?'

'Surely, surely,' answered the preacher gently. 'My mission is to snatch brands from the burning, not to be a firebrand myself. You may rely upon my own silence, but I cannot hush the tongues of others.'

'Then do others know ?' she inquired in a faltering voice.

'It is impossible to say. What I have seen may have been seen by many.'

'Heaven forbid !' murmured Lady Trevor.

Mr. Smug and she exchanged a farewell, the cordiality of which would, had it been witnessed, have been itself a source of scandal ; and in a few minutes she was on her way to Spinney Cottage.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE OLD HOME.

Lady Trevor, as we are well aware, had no need to ask the shortest road to Spinney Cottage. Fortunately, it lay outside the village—indeed, it was at the extreme boundary of the parish itself—and could be approached by by-roads on which there was little chance of meeting people. To a dweller in towns there are few things more striking in the country than the scantiness of its population. It is difficult for them to understand how the fields are tilled, or who brings the products to market ; and at certain times of the day it was possible to walk for miles at Mirbridge—unless in the village street itself—without meeting a fellow creature.

Had Lady Trevor been on any ordinary errand, this solitude, combined with the cloudless sky, the autumnal tints upon the trees, the freshness of the air, and the undertones of music with which Nature filled it, would have soothed and calmed her ; but it was now only grateful to her because it sheltered her from observation. The landscape, too, had less of beauty for her than association. Every foot of it was familiar to her—for the country knows but little change—and reminded her of a far-back past.

It was her first visit to the Spinney since her return to Mirbridge, yet it seemed but yesterday since she had trodden this purple moor, that shady grove, or followed this winding path by the rivulet. Her brother she had not seen since that day she met him on the Bridge Hill. It had been easy to avoid him, for he was not a man to press his attentions upon 'the quality,' when there was nothing to be got out of them ; he did not love the aristocracy of his native land, as many of us do, for their own sake ; and it was not to be expected, though the bargain between his father and old Sir Marmaduke had, in Mr. John

Beeton's opinion, been a bad one, that it would be bettered, now that Letty and her child were dead and gone, by any argument he could use with Sir Richard. Jenny, too, Lady Trevor had scarcely seen since that day at the Court. She had by no means forgotten her; and had resolved to benefit her, when she should be married and removed from Mirbridge, as much as she dared. But as long as she remained at home there would be danger, she felt, in any familiarity with her, and she had therefore avoided it. It had now, however, become necessary to visit her under the very roof that had once been her own. In some respects her own history was repeating itself in Jenny's. In the very spinney which she was now approaching—a little wood of exceeding beauty, that seemed indeed 'for whispering lovers made'—she had herself been wooed by the youthful Heir of Mirbridge Court, though not, as Jenny was reported to be, unwillingly.

The stile, the path, the stream, would each have had its bittersweet memories of the past for her, but they were overpowered and swallowed up by the anxieties of the present. Her eye roved hither and thither, not for a phantom lover, but a real one, not in tender regret, but in sickening apprehension. Bloodshed! There was another spinney in the parish, where, as she well remembered, a murder had been long ago committed; and what if this fair spot should be desecrated likewise by a similar crime! She was not afraid of Hugh now, she was afraid *for* him, and capable of any word or deed to save him from the consequences of his own wickedness; for, curiously enough, though so devoted to him, she took his wickedness for granted. She moved quickly, but cautiously, with eye and ear on the alert; the rustling of the leaves, the murmuring of the brook, often startled her; the trunks of the slender trees, the contour of the bushes, often took, in her feverish imagination, human forms, but she met no one. The little Eden was for that afternoon without its serpent. A good reason for this was, however, manifest when she came in sight of the cottage, for before its door, upon a tree trunk, two persons were sitting, namely, John Beeton, and a much younger man, whom she rightly judged to be his prospective son-in-law, Harry Grange.

She hastily withdrew into the wood, which was thicker than of yore about the house, and thoroughly concealed her. The men were out of earshot, yet so near that she could perceive the old poacher was sharpening a peg for a rabbit-net (an occupation with which of old she had been very familiar) while his companion read aloud to him from an open letter. The matter seemed to him to be important, for now and again the slow and monotonous voice, that belongs to all readers who are 'no scholards,' would pause interrogatively, and the elder man would put in his

word, roughly and grudgingly, as was his way. Lady Trevor remembered it well, though his appearance had greatly altered from what it had been, and, of course, for the worse. Up to middle life, the labouring man, as he is called, commonly holds his own as regards health with his richer brother, and has even the advantage of him; he has lived more in the fresh air, and taken more exercise; later on, the scale dips the other way; exposure to the elements begins to tell upon the frame no longer stout enough to defy them, and it is bowed prematurely by a whole pedlar's pack of ailments.

Jack Beeton was Sir Richard's contemporary, and had nature been left alone would have looked much the younger and stronger man, but he had lived a fast life as well as a hard one, and its effects were beginning to manifest themselves. His sister remembered him as a handsome fellow, though with a coarse and reckless air that marred his comeliness; the coarseness and recklessness had now become the chief traits in a countenance that had suffered less from exposure than from the remedies, or the pretence of remedies, that had been taken for it.

Every glass of gin 'to keep the cold out' had left its record on his face as its wet foot stains the tavern table.

It was of importance to Lady Trevor to call to mind what sort of brother he had been to her, that she might deduce from the recollection what conduct might be expected from him as a father. Mrs. Grange had said that he loved his daughter, and it might be so; but she had a shrewd suspicion that his affection for her was secondary to that he entertained for himself. He was of a disposition jovial enough, and could sing a good song, especially if his whistle was wetted, as he expressed it, at a comrade's expense; but his nature was too selfish to be really genial. He had been a spendthrift as far as his limited means permitted, but, at the same time, had been fond of money: that is an attribute which rarely wears out with age, as she knew it had not done so in his case.

He had applied more than once to Sir Richard for pecuniary assistance—an increase of the monthly allowance that was made to him—and had been denied it; her husband's good nature had prompted otherwise, but Lady Trevor had perceived the danger of generosity to one who, incapable of appreciating such a motive, was only too likely to set it down to fear; a harsh judgment, it may be said, of a brother by a sister, but it must be remembered that this man, though in no respect blameworthy for her wrong-doing, was in receipt of wages in compensation for it, and had shown himself more solicitous about them than sensitive of her shame.

So far as he knew, she was in her grave, a reflection which, doubtless, made her more bitter against him; the dead, we are

told, regard us with 'larger other eyes than ours, which make allowance for us all,' but that is, probably, far from being the case with persons who are only supposed to be deceased, and as it were 'in hiding.' It is sad to reflect 'how soon the memory of a good man dies with those he held most dear,' but it must be sadder to the good man himself who has the opportunity of remarking it in his own proper person. With Mirbridge and its unconscious people Lady Trevor had many tender associations, but as regarded her brother she had none.

In the bitterness of her feelings against him, she had even allowed herself to conceive of him as conniving at Hugh's flirtation with his daughter for the sake of the hush-money that might be extorted from him; but this was only a passing thought, which she knew had done her brother wrong. The picture of him which was prominent in her mind, and which had brought her to the spinney to-day, was that of an avenger; she felt that if he suspected her son's intentions, no sum of money she could command would prevent him from breaking every bone in that sombre Lothario's body. Money, however, could do much, and to avert even the breath of scandal, much more such a catastrophe as that, she was prepared to spend her last shilling.

'Why, that's nigh on a hundred pounds!' Those words, spoken by Jack Beeton in a stormy and contemptuous voice, seemed like a continuation of her thoughts.

'That's what he says,' returned the younger man, raising his voice in emulation of the other's tones. 'It's not my proposition, but his, and if you can't help me there's an end of it.'

'Well, then, there *is* an end of it, and so you may tell him,' replied Beeton with an oath; and both men rose from their seats and went indoors, gloomily, as it seemed, enough.

'An end of *what?*' wondered the eaves-dropper. Not of Jenny's marriage, surely; that would be the most unfortunate thing under the circumstances that could happen. In that case, for one thing, it would be necessary to take Sir Richard into her confidence at once, and that would involve—what above all things she desired to avoid—a rupture between her husband and her son. It was only for her sake, as she well knew, that Sir Richard 'put up with him,' as he expressed it, as it was; and the revelation of any disgraceful conduct in him would not only make an end of forbearance, but, despite all promises to the contrary, might bring down that sword of Damocles which hung by a hair over Hugh's head.

The talk that had taken place without the cottage would seem to have been renewed inside it, or, what was probable enough, a third person was being informed by the other two of the contents of the letter that had so moved them, for it was nearly an hour before the male inmates of the cottage re-

appeared. They walked together a few paces into the wood, and then took different paths, each parting from the other with a silent nod, which in the younger man seemed to speak of dejection, and in the elder of sullen discontent. Upon the whole, Lady Trevor concluded that there had been no quarrel, from which—since quarrel there would probably have been, had the match between George and Jenny been broken off—she gathered some comfort. She was glad to remark, too, that the young fellow was well-looking, frank in expression, despite the obvious disappointment that clouded it, and looking altogether like a man who, having once won an honest girl's love, was not likely to lightly lose it.

Having waited sufficient time to convince herself that the coast was clear, Lady Trevor advanced cautiously to the cottage. All about it she noticed had a more liveable look than when she herself had dwelt there. The garden was better tended, the three stone steps that led to the door more scrupulously clean, while the whole face of the house was overhung with creepers, which gave it a picturesque appearance it had wholly lacked in her time. These improvements she rightly set down to Jenny's love of work and good taste, and that being so, she could not but wonder that, in spite of its being a warm autumn day, every lattice was fast closed as though it had been winter weather.

The poor are only too fond of shutting out every breath of air from their habitations, but in this case she had looked for better judgment.

She knocked at the door with her parasol, and failing to make herself heard, turned the handle, and, to her great surprise, found that the door was locked.

Was it possible that the cottage was empty, and her errand in vain?

On a second summons, however, Jenny's voice was heard from an upper window—at which, however, she did not appear—inquiring who was there, and on her replying 'Lady Trevor,' she was admitted, though not till after some delay, by Jenny herself.

The girl looked very pale and wretched, and in her face were plainly to be seen the traces of many tears.

'Why, Jenny,' said her visitor cheerfully, as she stepped into the little parlour she knew so well, 'you take as great precautions with your cottage as though burglary in the day-time was a common offence at Mirbridge.'

Jenny elaborately dusted a chair before presenting it for the other's acceptance, and murmured a hesitating something about there being tramps about.

'Indeed. I should have thought even a tramp would have been careful about coming to your father's house with any ill intentions, if all tales of him be true.'

What Lady Trevor referred to was Mr. Beeton's reputation for reckless valour, but his daughter in her humility translated it as an allusion to his sporting propensities.

'Why, yes, my lady, he has generally a gun or two about.' Here she looked more agitated than ever, like one who has said something the full signification of which does not strike him till after he has uttered it. Her visitor guessed her thoughts and shared her fears. That particular form of 'bloodshed' had not hitherto struck her, but the likelihood of its occurrence now at once presented itself to her, and filled her with sickening fear.

'Jenny,' she said earnestly, after a short pause, during which her heart seemed to stop and then to recommence beating so loudly that she could hear it, 'I am come here as your friend, believing you to be in sad trouble. I need not ask if it is so,' she went on as the other kept silence, 'for I can see that it is. You have, unhappily, no mother; let me entreat of you to confide in me, as if you had one, and I were she.'

'I have had bad news, my lady, this morning,' faltered the girl.

'We will talk of that presently, when perhaps I shall be able to make it wear a better face. But you were in trouble before the bad news came.'

Jenny answered nothing, but turned scarlet. It was terrible to her to have to talk of such a matter to anybody, but worst of all to her present companion.

Again Lady Trevor guessed the cause of her confusion—which, indeed, was natural enough—and hastened to her rescue.

'It is bad for me, my dear girl,' continued Lady Trevor, divining her thoughts, 'to have to discuss this deplorable affair; but it is worse for you, so I will not pain you with any unnecessary questions. But is it not true that you are persecuted by the attentions of my son, Hugh Trevor?'

'Yes, yes,' murmured Jenny piteously, then sank into a chair, and burst into tears.

It had been in Lady Trevor's mind to ask Jenny whether something she had said or done could have been translated into a hint or encouragement to him; but, with such a spectacle before her, she dared not do it. Moreover she felt only too well convinced that the less she said about her son the better.

'Mr. Hugh knows that I am engaged to Harry,' gasped Jenny, sobbing, 'and yet he persists in coming here. He wants me to run away from home, and marry him instead.'

A little reflection should have convinced Lady Trevor that in this Hugh had lied; but for the moment she believed him to be in earnest, and it made her more angry with him than anything that had gone before. For a mere passionate fancy, then, this son, for whom she had devoted herself body and soul, was

prepared to wreck his whole future! To scheme, and plan, and toil for such a man was love's labour lost indeed! The position of the girl, too, almost as much her own flesh and blood as himself, and terrorised by merciless importunity, appealed to all that was best in her nature. Her sense of justice for the moment overmastered her.

'Why did you not complain of him to your father?' she inquired indignantly.

'O my lady, you do not know my father! There would have been murder done.'

'*Good* girl, *good* girl!' exclaimed Lady Trevor precipitately; 'you did quite right. You must promise me not to tell him now, but to leave everything in my hands. You should have come to me instead of Mr. Smug.'

'I thought of that, my lady; but I dared not. Moreover, as I was to be married at once, and go away from Mirbridge—— But that is all over now,' and again she broke into a passion of sobs.

Lady Trevor threw herself on her knees, and pressed her lips to Jenny's wet cheek.

'Pray, pray believe that I am your friend, dear girl,' she whispered earnestly, 'and tell me the whole story.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PRECAUTIONARY MEASURE.

Poor Jenny had not much to tell that might not have been predicated by one who knew the world and its ways. Her beauty had really made an impression upon Hugh Trevor's heart as deep as it was capable of receiving. If he had deceived her in his proffer of marriage, he had in his mad passion risked as much as marriage itself would have cost him: rupture with a father already justly incensed against him; the turning of his mother's devotion into disgust; punishment of the severest kind at the hands of Jenny's father and lover; and the breaking off of his relations with Clara Thorne, which were really become as deep-rooted in his nature as its soil permitted. Selfish as he was, his selfishness was shallow, and without premeditation, and for the gratification of the moment he was capable of the most reckless conduct. Such men are far more dangerous to society than more calculating scoundrels, because no sagacity can guard against their acts. On the other hand, in such vehement and egotistic natures there is no seductive charm; and it is probable, even if her affections had not been otherwise engaged, that such persuasive eloquence as was at his command would have been dropped in vain in Jenny's ear. As it was, she loathed him from

the first, a circumstance which, though he perceived it, in no way interfered with its Satyr-like pursuit of her. Her native modesty and respect for her superiors, and even a fear of the consequences to her persecutor should his conduct be revealed, had kept her silent till Mr. Smug had forced her hand. She was not without confidence in his power to help her, though somewhat apprehensive of the steps he might take to do so; but what had sustained her most under her sufferings was the knowledge that they must at least be short-lived. Her marriage with Harry Grange was to take place in a few weeks, after which she would reside in London.

Unhappily that very morning a letter had come from the carpenter with whom it was agreed that Harry was to go into partnership, excusing himself from that arrangement on the ground that he had been offered a sum of money to take another man in his place. He was sorry, he wrote, but 'he had a wife and children' (a tender statement enough, but which, when it appears in business matters, always involves sharp practice on the part of the speaker), and was compelled to look to his own interests in the matter, and unless the same sum could be raised by Grange, he must be off his bargain. It was not 'pretty'—but so many things, not only in the carpentering line, are not 'pretty'—and there being no legal obligation to hold him, there was nothing for it but to submit.

Harry, indeed, had appealed to his prospective father-in-law for a loan, but Mr. John Beeton was either unable, or unwilling, to lend him so large a sum, and the date of the young people's marriage had therefore become, at the least, uncertain. To Jenny's relation of affairs, given with much modesty and hesitation, but bearing the unmistakable impress of truth, Lady Trevor listened with rapt attention.

'Are you sure,' she inquired, when it was finished, 'that you have spoken to no one else save to Mr. Smug of my son's ill-conduct?'

'I am quite sure, my lady,' Jenny answered simply; 'I think I should have told Mrs. Grange had I had the chance, but I could only do so by going up to the Court, and that I dared not do.'

The mention of her so doing, indeed, alarmed Lady Trevor as much as it did herself. To get Jenny out of the way, and to keep Sir Richard in ignorance of the whole matter, were both of paramount importance. Her first impulse was to propose to the two young people to elope, and thereby sever at once the Gordian knot of their difficulties, but a little reflection brought her to a better mind. She had no right, as she acknowledged to herself, to expose this girl to the least breath of slander to save her son from the risk of disgrace; and if any other plan should

necessitate her taking another person into her confidence she was bound to do the very best she could for Jenny, even at that Lazard.

As for money, it was the least part of her difficulty, for, though she had no actual control over her husband's finances, he had the most absolute confidence in her, and never questioned her expenditure.

'What is the sum required to ensure Harry his partnership?' she asked.

'It is nearly a hundred pounds, my lady.'

'Then you may tell him to-day that that sum will be forthcoming. I will advance him the money myself.'

'Oh, my lady, but how can we ever repay you?' exclaimed Jenny.

'By doing exactly what I tell you,' was the quiet reply. 'Harry must go up to town at once and look after his own interests, and I shall send you after him.'

It was a delightful prospect; but there was an obstacle in the foreground to which Jenny could hardly shut her eyes.

'But I have no friends in London, my lady, and I could not go without father; and father is very difficult to stir.'

Lady Trevor had a shrewd suspicion that another fifty pounds would be found very efficacious to stir him either in the direction of London or elsewhere; but, on the other hand, such an offer would be sure to arouse his suspicions. It was essential that the *rôle* of Lady Bountiful should not be over-played.

'You will not go with your father, but with Harry's mother, who is the proper person, not only to look after yourself, but to prepare his house for him.'

'Then you will have to tell Mrs. Grange,' murmured Jenny, in affrighted tones.

'I shall tell her nothing that will not be pleasing to her, if I can help it; leave all that to me. You had better see about packing your things, for you will be off to-morrow. When your father comes back you will say that I found you in sad trouble, and have made up my mind to help you. From what I hear of him he is a sensible man, and will not object to *that*. As to Harry, he would be a fool, indeed, to look such a gift horse in the mouth.'

(It was lucky for Lady Trevor that the excitement and agitation which had robbed her of her usual prudence also prevented Jenny exercising her powers of observation, or it would certainly have struck her that for a Frenchwoman her ladyship had a considerable command of English idioms.)

'Tell him to come up to the Court this afternoon, and his mother will give him the money and arrange matters.'

She felt that she was leaving Jenny a good deal to do in the

way of explaining things ; but she trusted to her woman's wit, and also to the facility with which people accept what is for their own benefit ; and, after all, much the harder, as well as the more delicate, task remained for herself.

The urgency and importance of her errand had prevented the associations which the sight of her old home would otherwise have evoked ; but now that it was accomplished, so far as in her lay, they began to take hold of her. The gratitude of the girl, expressed in the simplest but most heart-felt way, moved her, too, towards Jenny herself.

In putting her out of harm's way, she felt that she was not only performing a duty that every woman owes to another, but acknowledging a claim of kinship. If she had had a daughter of her own she would have given her, in full measure, a mother's love, and in some sort her niece appealed to this undeveloped passion. With wonder Jenny perceived the tears steal down the cheek of her alien and high-born visitor, as she bade her farewell.

It was no small part of the punishment of Lady Trevor's own wrong-doing that she must needs send away from her that innocent and tender girl who had so close a claim upon her, and whom it would have been a life-long pleasure to take under her wing.

'May I see you again, my lady, before I go ?' inquired Jenny pleadingly.

'No, dear, I think it will be better not,' she answered coldly, but with a pang far keener than the disappointment her reply aroused in her companion ; 'but you have always a friend in me, remember, who, though far off, can stretch out a hand to help you.'

There are often reasons best known to ourselves why our personal benefits to others should have these limitations ; but Lady Trevor's case was an especially hard one : she was cutting herself off from an affection on which she could have relied, and of which she stood in sore need ; for there was not a woman in the world she could call her friend.

She reached home by the same unfrequented path by which she had come, and though in a calmer frame of mind, so wrapt in her own sad thoughts that she forgot to call on her way upon Mr. Smug, as she had intended, to inform him of the success of her enterprise. It would be time enough, she reflected, to do this when her arrangements with Mrs. Grange were completed ; as if in this world there was ever 'time enough' to take precautions against We-know-not-whom who stands with sinister smile and armed hand beside every one of us, to strike us where our defence is weakest.

In the housekeeper's room she found not only Mrs. Grange,

but her son Harry, who had come to tell her his bad news from town. It would have been safer, perhaps, to have seen her alone, but, on the whole, she was not sorry to have the opportunity of judging for herself what sort of a husband Jenny had chosen. He was a well-looking young fellow, with a frank and honest face, but most distressingly shy—which from what she had heard of his antecedents she had not expected. His brief experience as a soldier had not apparently destroyed a modesty which suffused his cheek with colour under her gaze, and confined his replies to monosyllables. He listened to her praises of Jenny with a proud satisfaction that well became him, but also with a certain air of triumph directed to his mother that did not escape Lady Trevor's notice. She at once concluded that something had occurred to make Mrs. Grange less enthusiastic about her future daughter-in-law than heretofore, independent of the pecuniary misfortune that had disarranged the young fellow's matrimonial plans; for, though shrewd enough, she was far too truthful and high-minded to be actuated by any sordid feelings. Was it possible that some breath of scandal respecting Hugh had already reached her ears?

When Lady Trevor, however, disclosed her benevolent intentions, they were received with a gratitude that forbade the existence of any suspicion of their motive; and as she went on to express her pleasure at being of service to the young people, the housekeeper opened her heart to her. John Beeton, it appeared, had made himself very disagreeable to Harry that morning, and even hinted that Jenny might do better for herself than marry him; a suggestion which, to use the young man's graphic expression, had 'put his mother's back up;' she had probably made some observations similar to that of Mr. Beeton's, but from the opposite point of view. Both mother and son, however, expressed their grateful acceptance of a proposal that seemed a short cut out of all difficulties, and it was arranged that Harry should leave for town that afternoon, and Mrs. Grange follow him with Jenny on the morrow morning. This fortunately left but a few hours, since, until the girl was well away, Lady Trevor was a prey to forebodings and apprehensions. To know that Harry was gone was so far a relief to her, but on the other hand, his absence, if known to Hugh, might be itself a source of danger. How Jenny had fared in her explanation of the matter to her father was also a source of great anxiety to her. Mrs. Grange had gone to the cottage and arranged with the girl as to the hour of departure, but Mr. Beeton had not at that time returned home. He was probably solacing himself for the bad news of the morning at the public-house, and there was no knowing in what frame of mind he might return from it. There were times with him when

obstinacy and resentment usurped the place of self-interest, or, in other words, when he became so blind drunk that he could not see his own advantage. To move in the matter further, however, was obviously dangerous; and there was nothing for Lady Trevor but to be patient and hope for the best. Who of us is so fortunate as not to know what it is to be condemned to inaction when encompassed by peril? Under such circumstances there is only one source of comfort—and this was closed to her. To some men, and to many women, the consciousness of their own guilty conduct is not a bar to an appeal for Divine aid even in a matter in which that conduct is involved; but with Lady Trevor it was not so. A hypocrite to her fellow-creatures, she shrank from paltering with her Creator; and while far from irreligious in her general views and behaviour, she left with a piteous Faith, whose other name was Misgiving, all that concerned her elder son to Fate.

He dined as usual with the family, and for once she regretted that Clara Thorne was not of the party; in the evening she regretted it still more, for happening to look into the billiard-room, where the young men were at their usual game, she found only Charles and Mr. Gurdon; Hugh, they said, had gone out with his cigar for a stroll.

As the true word is often spoken in jest, so it frequently happens that a piece of information, lightly dropped as of no concern, has a significance to the hearer undreamt of by him who utters it. To Lady Trevor this news given to her by Mr. Gurdon, between two strokes of his cue, and less regarded than either, raised before her eyes a mist of blood. She had none to confide in; none to take the bright side of things, or rally her upon her morbid fears. If Sir Richard had not been asleep in his chair, with those lines of care and pain showing on his thin cheeks so piteously, she might have been driven in her feverish anxiety to tell him all. How cruelly calm looked the still face of nature as she paced the terrace like some wild creature caged; how indifferent to her prayers and pains looked the autumn sky! Then, after all (so hard is the way of transgressors), these self-inflicted tortures were suffered in vain, for presently she heard the front door slam, and Hugh's clear whistle (for he whistled like a blackbird) sounding through the hall, and she knew by its cheerful note that all was, so far, well.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN ANXIOUS MORNING.

It had been arranged that Mrs. Grange and Jenny were to start early in the morning—early, that is, even as time was reckoned at Mirbridge—so as to excite as little notice as possible. Farmer

Wurzel had been asked by the housekeeper to lend his taxed cart for their conveyance, to which he had acceded with characteristic good-nature. She was of a modest and unassuming disposition, and it did not strike her as strange that her mistress, who had so many horses and vehicles at her disposal, should not have offered to send her, while to Lady Trevor it was most important that she should seem to have no hand in the matter of the two women's departure. If she could only feel that they were safely away, she felt that she should breathe more freely—one kink in the faulty cable of her life would then at least have passed over the roller. Fortunately she could not foresee how lengthy and how full of kinks it was fated to be. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof, but sufficient, alas! for the unhappy wrong-doer in a double sense. One turn of the rack at a time was all that she could bear.

All that night sleep came not near her, but her very thoughts were nightmares. At daybreak she rose and dressed, and through the misty autumn morning repaired to a spot by which the cart must needs pass by. Hidden in a little wood, drenched in dew, she awaited its coming. It was not her intention to speak with its inmates, for the presence of the driver forbade it, but only to assure herself of their departure. She was much too soon, but every minute she pictured to herself some disaster to account for their delay. Her ears were on the stretch for the sound of wheels, but they heard nothing but the 'drip, drip' of the boughs, and 'through the fading leaves the chestnuts pattering to the ground.'

It was a wet and mournful morning, and so far nature was in unison with her thoughts, but otherwise all things seemed strange and unsympathetic indeed. If an open grave had been in the wood (as she reflected), and she had lain down in it to die, it would have altered nothing, unless, indeed, it would have brought peace to herself?—a question to which she offered no reply save by a shudder. We speak of annihilation as abhorrent, but there are more terrible things which the thoughts of death evoke in certain minds. Pitiable indeed is their condition to whom the end of a miserable life presents itself only as the beginning of another that has no end. To this unhappy woman there was but one alternative—the same that was offered to the Russian peasant pursued by wolves, of which she had read in story—by the sacrifice of her eldest born she might save, not indeed her life, but her soul. This seemed, however, too much for Heaven to ask of her; and since on her part she dared ask nothing of Heaven, she resolutely closed the door of reflection, and murmured to herself, instead of a prayer, 'I will go through with it.'

At last, without sound of wheels, as she expected, but with the squeak of an axle and the crack of a whip, the cart appeared.

The two women were in it, the driver by their side at the end of the seat, with a huge box behind them—containing, doubtless, all one of them had in the world. Yet what would that unseen spectator, who watched them through the leafy screen, have given to exchange places with her of whom Youth and Hope were the companions, and honest Love in waiting for her at the end of her rough journey! Jenny's face, however, she noticed was far from joyous; and as they jogged slowly by in silence it was more than once turned behind her with anxious and desponding looks. Home is home, be it never so homely; and she was sad no doubt at leaving it for the first time, and perhaps for ever. It had not been so with Letty Beeton in her day. She had exchanged the cottage for the Court with pleasure, and, though she well knew Remorse (a companion, indeed, who never left her), could hardly be said to have experienced Regret. Even now, as she reviewed that early portion of her life, she doubted, if it could be lived again, whether she should live it otherwise. Her case had not been the common one of a girl in lowly station, dazzled by the position of some high-born lover, and fascinated by him like the moth by the flame. If she had been blinded it had been by a genuine affection, however misplaced. It had been, of course, her duty to have gone to her dear mistress and patron and opened her heart to her; but it would not have been to ask to be defended against her son only, but against herself. This (so she reasoned in her wretchedness) could have had but one result: she would have been separated from her Richard for ever, and sent back to her hateful home. Such self-sacrifice was surely too much to expect of her. If all the rest had followed from her weakness in that particular her fate was hard indeed; she might fairly say that she had been tempted beyond her powers of resistance. But she could not conceal from herself that it had not so followed.

There comes a time to many of us when we find ourselves, as it were, on a landing midway on a flight of stairs. The upper flight is steep and difficult, but leads, we know, to the fresh air and the vault of heaven; the lower is broader and very easy, and leads, we fear, in the opposite direction. We would fain stop where we are; but it is as imperative upon us to move as though the staircase was not stationary, but one of those endless lifts into which we must step on its way either up or down. We flatter ourselves perhaps that it is actually so, and that we have no control over our own progress; but in our heart of hearts we know that it is not so. Every step, whether upward or downward, is made by our own action. We take but one step down, then a curious thing happens. That step at once grows steep and narrow, and is added to the flight above, and we feel at once that we are not only farther off from heaven, but have

rendered the way upward more difficult. We descend another and another, and then, suddenly, ten steps at a time. The shock we experience is considerable, and we find ourselves on another landing. The upper flight has now become a mere attic stair, with only a faint light at its summit, from which comes a little fresh air. The same alternative is presented to us as before, but under much less favourable conditions. Again we descend a little way, and again are suddenly precipitated down ten steps, or it may be twenty; but this time it produces hardly any shock at all. 'Facilis descensus Averni.'

Lady Trevor had chosen—or, as she preferred to think, had been led to it by the iron hand of Fate—the downward flight; and twice had fallen, the latter fall—her concealment of her son Hugh's illegitimacy—being, as it were, precipitous: it had left her almost in utter darkness. From purity to shame is a sad step; but from shame to crime is a descent still more terrible. There are crimes which, as regards their consequences at least, one can commit, as it were, and have done with; but this one was not of that kind. It demanded constant duplicity. She had endeavoured to persuade her husband that it was not a crime, but had not succeeded. This was not to be wondered at, for she had not persuaded herself of it. She had a tender heart, and a conscience that was by no means callous. Inaction, such as she had endured that morning, was hateful to her, because it begot reflection. Her mind was for the moment relieved by the assurance of Jenny's departure; but, at the same time, she had suffered terribly. Physically, too, she was in a sad case. Her sleepless night and the unwonted exercise at such an early hour had weakened her. It is not everyone who derives vigour from meeting the sun upon the upland lawn; and brushing the dew away is not an occupation suitable for those who wear petticoats. She was sick with fatigue and want of food, and her clothes were wet and draggled. It was necessary that she should get home, if possible, unseen, before the household was stirring; but she felt very unequal to walking fast. She gazed with envious eyes at the curtained windows of the cottagers, behind which most of them were still sleeping, if not the sleep of the just, at least of the crimeless. Her way at one point, though at some distance, commanded a view of the Rectory. How silent and peaceful it looked! How innocent, by comparison with herself, were its indwellers! Clara Thorne, indeed, might have her designs, but they involved no wrong to others. And Lucy—what a gulf lay between that artless girl and her wretched self!

The rain was now over and gone, and the newly-risen sun made the wet leaves sparkle, and tinged the very land with brightness; but, though it warmed her shivering frame, it seemed to increase the danger of discovery. In the presence of the glory of the morning she felt like a thief on whom the bull's-eye

of the policeman is turned. Even though she met no one in the village street, it was possible that she might have been observed unknown to herself. Again and again she blamed her own anxious folly in running so great a risk; but there was nothing for it now but to hurry on. The tenants of the lodge were not yet stirring as she passed through the great gates. Her last fear lay in meeting the gardener, who she knew was an early riser. He was the worst person whom she could meet (except Cadman), because he had known her in the old days, and might have his suspicions. From the terrace, however, she could survey the whole garden, and he was not in sight.

In another moment she would be safe inside the house. Just as she reached the glass door, however, from which she herself had removed the shutter for egress, it opened, and out stepped Mr. Gurdon with his easel and brushes. He uttered an involuntary ejaculation of astonishment before he removed his hat. It struck her by the expression of his face that for the moment he had not recognised her. She felt with a shudder that this was not to be wondered at. A lady, it is said, always looks like a lady; but it is at all events possible that she may look like some other lady. A dry lady may be identified with a wet lady; but a lady with sodden clothes and draggled skirts, and with the look of a hunted hare, is not so easy to identify with one we have only seen attired in the height of fashion, and with all the self-possession of a graceful hostess. Such a painful embarrassment displayed itself on the young man's features that Lady Trevor pitied him, notwithstanding her despair upon her own account. He had a ready wit, but for once it failed him. He could not say, 'I do not wonder that this beautiful morning should have tempted you out, as it has tempted me.' She had not the excuse of his profession, even if it had been fine, and she had been obviously in the wet for hours.

'I have had a bad night, with an excruciating headache,' she said, with a faint smile, 'and I thought that a walk, even in the rain, might do me good.'

'It is the best thing in the world for it,' he said effusively, 'if one only escapes catching cold. There is no one astir in the house, I fear—but can I get you anything?'

She knew when he said 'I fear' that he meant 'you need not fear; it is I alone who have seen you,' as well as though he had used the words. There was a tender pity in his tone that went to her very heart.

'I thank you; nothing,' she murmured. 'I shall do very well; but it was very foolish of me, and I fear if my husband knew I had been so imprudent it would make him very anxious.'

'Then if I were you I should not tell him nor anyone else,' he answered, smiling. 'When one lives in the country one cannot

help being caught in a shower ; it is so very ill-provided with cabs.'

'Then you will keep this shocking secret for me,' she said, pointing to her dripping garments and forcing a smile.

'You may be sure of it, Lady Trevor, as though I had not seen you,' he answered earnestly. 'If it were a matter of any consequence, being, I hope, a gentleman, such a breach of confidence would be impossible to me.'

There was something in his simple kindly face and tender tone —the first touch of sympathy (though for sorrows that were unknown to him) she had ever experienced—that checked her thanks. If she had spoken she would, she felt, have utterly broken down. As though he had read as much in her face, he moved away, closing the door behind him, but without turning his head, and she sank into a chair and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNTIMELY CALLER.

AMONG the many perplexing problems of life, the way in which the most important events depend often upon the slightest incidents is often one of the most inexplicable. It would almost seem that foresight, prudence, and assiduity are, after all, little worth, since the slightest accident may render them useless. The turning to the left, instead of the right, in our daily walk may cause our death, and the delay of a minute on our road to a railway-station prove our ruin. The Mussulman says 'kismet,' and is satisfied, but for many of us it is only left to hope for the best, while we expect the worse.

When Lady Trevor found herself on her way upstairs to her own room, wet to the skin, worn out with fatigue, and shaken in mind and body, there seemed to be only one course open to her —to go to bed, and to leave an announcement outside her door that she did not wish to be disturbed. It would have been nothing very unusual, for she was subject to headaches, which sometimes deprived her of sleep until the morning. Now that she had seen Jenny away, there was nothing to cause her special anxiety, or to keep her, as it were, on duty belowstairs ; she was a sentry indeed who was never relieved, but danger had for the present disappeared, and she was free to rest.

As she passed the bath-room door, however, it struck her that her favourite remedy for fatigue—the douche—would restore her tone. She hesitated—not of course from any idea that her choice could be of any moment, but simply because the three steps up to the room were so much added to the road her weary limbs must traverse—and eventually decided in favour of cold water.

It revived her, as it always did, and wrapping her dressing-gown about her she was about to seek her own apartment, when something induced her to turn aside the blind and look out.

The window commanded the courtyard and the causeway, and upon the latter she beheld John Beeton coming with hasty steps towards the house.

The glow which had suffused the whole of her frame was at once exchanged for a cold shiver. What could John Beeton want at the Court at such an hour as this? and whom had he come to see? That it was something connected with Jenny—and with Hugh—was only too probable.

She had never met him face to face, save on that day of her arrival, on Bridge Hill; it was the one ordeal she had shrunk from with nervous terror. Sir Richard had seen him more than once; and by a certain cool civility had always kept him at a distance. He knew the man's character well, despised him, and was not afraid of him; she knew him too, and even better, but she feared him. John Beeton, it must be remembered—though she felt no touch of kin for him—was her own brother.

In her old home, on the previous day, she had had no little difficulty in maintaining her *rôle* of stranger; she had felt its influences affect her very strongly, and it had perhaps been fortunate for her that Jenny's mind was too much pre-occupied with her own affairs to use that faculty of observation which, where another woman is concerned, is common to all her sex.

Had her brother made his appearance at Spinney Cottage, she was convinced that the association of circumstances would have led him only too surely to the explanation of the confusion she could not have concealed; and even under her own roof there was something of that same danger; it was at the Court—though long ago—that he had seen her last, and on that very occasion had dropped some warm words of warning with respect to its young master, which she had resented all the more bitterly because they had come too late. What if some vague likeness in speech or form to her former self should cause the recollection to occur to him? When he had seen her in her travelling-dress and speaking French, she fancied that his eye had regarded her with an intentness—though it was probably only the keenness of curiosity—that had something of recognition in it.

No, it was impossible that she could face him. After all, he might have only come up to the house to speak with one of the servants. It could not be with the housekeeper, because he knew she was gone to town; but it might be with the butler, who, of course, was an old acquaintance.

From the extreme earliness of the hour, it was reasonable to suppose that he had called about some private and, perhaps, unlawful matter, such as the sale of game; most earnestly did

she hope that it might be so. But in any case there was nothing for it but to wait.

She went to her room and dressed herself, not hurriedly, for her habits of caution had taught her to avoid all appearance of surprise or haste, but with swift completeness.

Then ensued another form of anxiety, more terrible even than that she had experienced in the dripping wood. The servants had now risen ; doors were opened and shut ; and all the sounds of the awakening up in a great household fell on her eager ear. But whether John Beeton was still in the house or not, she could not tell. Perhaps he was waiting to have speech with her husband. This apprehension became insupportable, and she noiselessly crossed the corridor on the side of which lay Sir Richard's room. She listened at the door, but all was silent. He was a late sleeper, but a light one, and there was no little danger of awakening him ; but her anxiety to be assured that he had not been disturbed impelled her to run the risk. She softly turned the door-handle and entered the room—it was always kept dark to encourage sleep in the morning, but the light was now streaming through the windows, and the bed was empty—Sir Richard was up and gone.

It could have been no light matter that had made the invalid leave his couch so early. But so untimely a visit from John Beeton might well have caused him to do so ; that such was the case seemed the more probable since he had not informed her of his summons. If it had been any other person, connected with their common danger, he would, as usual, have come to her for advice and counsel, but he was well aware of her nervous apprehension of her brother, and was accustomed to deal with him.

John would have something to tell him to-day, however (she could no longer doubt it), that would move her husband exceedingly—provoking a mental excitement which the doctors had especially enjoined him to avoid.

The motive of her brother's visit she could not guess ; he could hardly have been otherwise than pleased at the generosity which she had displayed towards his daughter, and yet he was not the man to put himself to inconvenience merely to express the emotion of gratitude ; even if it were so (taking that as the most favourable view of affairs), his communication must necessarily reveal the part she had herself played in the matter, and her reason for playing it. Sir Richard would understand at once that it was Hugh's relations with the girl that had caused his mother's interference ; and this would not only intensify the bitterness of the prejudice with which he regarded him, but probably cause an open rupture between them.

Whatever mischief John Beeton's visit might make, it was certain by this time was made, and could neither be averted nor

mitigated by her interference; all that remained to her was to meditate, a thankless task to which she was only too well accustomed—and it was the cruellest part of her cruel lot—between father and son.

As she thus reviewed the probable position of affairs, she heard hasty footsteps in the passage that led to her elder son's apartment, and then a knock at his door. Her heart stood still at the thought that it might be her husband himself, but the next moment, in answer to Hugh's gruff 'Who's there?' she recognised the voice of the footman.

'Please, sir, Sir Richard wishes to see you at once in the library.'

'What the deuce is the matter?' was the irritable response; then in graver tones, 'Is anyone with him?'

'Only Beeton, sir, from the Spinney Cottage.'

The footman, doubtless, concluded the poacher's visit was in connection with the game, in which his young master Hugh, though no sportsman, took a certain feudal interest. He had said 'only Beeton,' from the genuine conviction that the matter in hand could be of no serious importance.

Hugh answered nothing, a circumstance which for his mother's ear had no little significance: it was seldom that he submitted in silence to anything that gave him inconvenience.

She waited till the servant had retired, and then knocked at her son's door.

'Well—what now?' The tone was one of subdued irritation; of anger, as she rightly concluded, controlled by fear.

'It is I, Hugh; I want to speak with you.'

He appeared at once, already half-dressed; his face was pale; his eyes full of terrified anxiety.

'John Beeton is here with your father.'

'Yes; what is it all about?'

'You know better than I do,' she answered reproachfully.

His face flushed to the forehead with rage and shame.

'I know that he is a lying blackguard, who will do anything for money. He promised'—there he stayed his speech, though he went on muttering something to himself; probably imprecations.

'Never mind what he promised, Hugh, Promise *me* on your word of honour that you will never speak to Jenny Beeton again as long as you live.'

He hesitated; not that he had any scruple to overcome; but because even in that hour of peril he was looking for his *quid pro quo*, as the spoilt child looks for his sweetmeats.

She understood him only too well.

'If you will pass your word to me, I will go down to your father, instead of you.'

'That's something like a mother,' he exclaimed, with an air of intense relief. 'Of course I'll promise not to see the girl again; she may go to the devil for all I care.'

It was Lady Trevor's intention to have learnt from Hugh all he had to tell about his relations—since it seemed he had had such—with John Beeton, but at this juncture the servant again appeared, with the message that Mr. Hugh was to come at once, a summons he delivered with no little embarrassment.

It is possible, if Hugh Trevor had known the nature of the task his mother had imposed upon herself, that even he would have felt some compunction; as it was, he only experienced relief that no time had been allowed to her for further questioning. His position was that of a criminal accused of a grave offence, concerning which he feels disinclined to be communicative even to his solicitor, a man who could be relied on to make a better case for him than he could do for himself. He little guessed that his advocate was weighed down less by the suspicion of his misdoing than by the consciousness of her own.

Her courage, however, had risen with the occasion, and she had all her woman's wits about her. Even on the threshold of that terrible ordeal she had the presence of mind to step aside into her boudoir, and write a letter, in a hand that showed little signs of the emotions that shook her very soul within her, to Mr Smug; this she carefully sealed and confided to the footman, with instructions that it was to be delivered immediately, and then with a firm step resumed her way to the library.

At the door she paused, and the gruesome reflection crossed her mind: 'Under what circumstances—altered as they will be for the worse—shall I next leave this room?' She dismissed it, however, with an effort, and entered with a quick step and haughty carriage.

During her momentary pause no sound had reached her from within; whatever quarrel had taken place, a truce had ensued between the unseen combatants, and their silence seemed somehow more significant of evil than high words could have been.

It was not from fear of the man she had so shrunk from meeting that Lady Trevor's gaze, after one hasty glance, fixed itself upon Sir Richard to the exclusion of his companion—her love was stronger than her fear, and she perceived at once that the excitement which her husband had undergone had had a serious effect upon him.

He was seated in his chair with his chin sunk in his hand; but what could be seen of his face was deadly pale, and his eyes, fixed on the floor, remained there, as though unconscious of her entrance. In a second or two, however, he raised them, and a look of unspeakable relief crossed his brow and every feature.

'Ah, Nannie, is it you?' he said, with a tender smile,

like some patient in a hospital, who, in expectation of the operator, looks up and sees in place of him some loved and welcome form. Then his face clouded over, and a sharp pain smote it like a lightning flash, and she knew that he was his unhappy self again.

'I sent for Hugh,' he said, in a voice that sounded strangely to her, and filled her with vague alarm. 'What delays him?'

A hoarse chuckle of contempt broke from the looker-on; she turned and faced him at once.

'Who is this man?' she said, with her foreign accent, and surveying him disdainfully from head to foot. It struck her even in that supreme moment that if she were only as much changed as he from what each had been in the old days her secret was safe.

He had been handsome in his youth, with a certain air of cheerful audacity (with which he had often faced 'the Bench' in Petty Sessions), and when in good humour had possessed a smile which more than one young person of the other sex had found irresistible. Now he looked uncomely and sullen to the last degree, struggling too (like Sir Richard himself, as it seemed to her, with a shudder) with some mental distraction, which she could not understand; he was, in fact, as often happens to those who have sacrificed on the previous night to Bacchus in a village pothouse, stale drunk.

'My name's John Beeton,' he answered doggedly; 'your husband knows me well enough, if *you* don't.'

'And what is it you want here?'

The poacher looked towards the squire, as if for guidance; he beheld a face transfigured with terror, staring at Lady Trevor and himself; the situation, as she perceived, had only just become intelligible to her husband; his recognition of it, to any intelligent observer, would have been almost a revelation, and was, at best, a side-light of a most dangerous kind.

'What is it I want here?' snarled the poacher, pointing to Sir Richard. 'Ask *him*. The thing has happened before, as he can tell yer. It's not the first time as you Trevors have shamed us. I want my daughter, Jenny.'

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE INTERVIEW.

THE question that John Beeton had asked—as was to be read in Sir Richard's face, through its film of pain and shame—might, indeed, under other circumstances, have been a terrible one. But to Lady Trevor it was welcome. What had happened to bring her brother there, she did not know; but she held the key of the last lock of the situation. Moreover, she could afford—

when the time came—to be frank about it ; and it is only they who live a life of duplicity who can appreciate the privilege of being at liberty to tell the truth. As the visitor had said 'ask *him*,' she turned to her husband, with an incredulous 'What does the man mean ?'

'It is Hugh,' he answered ; not angrily, nor even gravely (as she expected), but in low and broken tones that filled her with alarm. There was an accent of despair in them, easily to be accounted for, if it had referred to the person accused, but, as she perceived at once, it did not do so, but was the outcome of sheer physical exhaustion. For the moment it was impossible to attend to him, to gauge the extent of the mischief it was only too plain had been effected by the other's ill news ; the best and only service she could do for him was to prove it unfounded. That she could look for no assistance from him in the contest before her dispirited her not one whit. She had now her husband to defend as well as her son, and her courage had grown with her resentment.

'You hear what Sir Richard says, ma'am ?' growled the poacher. 'He has sent for the young gentleman, and he has not put in an appearance : and for a very good reason ; he is not in the house at all.'

Sir Richard here made a fresh sign of remonstrance.

'Oh, yes ; I know the footman said he was ; but the footman knows how to lie ; he has learnt that before from his young master.'

'I have just parted from my son, Hugh, myself, sir,' said Lady Trevor coldly.

'Indeed ! Then why did he not come with you ?' inquired the other contemptuously.

'Because I have forbidden him to come.'

'Then it's the first time I've heard of his doing anything he was bid. Come, come, ma'am, this won't do. I have had it out with Sir Richard, and he has thrown up the sponge ; there is not a word to be said for the scoundrel ; if you knew as much as your husband does you would be as humble, leastways to *me*, at all events.'

'Be so good, then, as to say to me all you have said to him.'

'Well, I don't wish to be hard on a lady, you see ; and the matter—as far as it can be so—has been arranged for.'

'In other words, you have been getting money under false pretences, Mr. Beeton.'

'Oh, you say that, do you ? You had better take care, my lady, for my temper, like your own, to judge by your face, is rather short. You little know what you are asking, when you say, "Tell me all." I must get your husband's leave first, for one thing. What do you say, Sir Richard ?'

To this appeal the Baronet made no verbal reply; his eyes were fixed on the speaker, but with a dim, apathetic expression; he did not seem to understand the question that had been put to him; his head dropped, however, a little, and the other took it as a gesture of assent.

'Well, in talking to you, since you will have it, ma'am, I shall have to say something more than I said to Sir Richard, because he was in possession of certain facts, to begin with, which, I suppose, out of delicacy, or, perhaps, because he was afraid of you, he has kept from your ladyship's ear.'

She shrugged her shoulders in her foreign fashion, and, regarding him with a cold, contemptuous stare, which never left him for an instant, awaited the story of her shame.

'I had a sister once,' he said, 'a simple, innocent girl, who was schoolmistress in this village. Sir Richard's mother took a fancy to her, as well she might, and removed her from her cottage home, where she dwelt happily with her father and myself, to this very roof. We missed her very much; but, because it seemed for her own good, we let her go.'

'Then you took no money in recompense, I suppose?'

'Money! It was not a question of money; though, now you mention it, I believe there was a something paid my father in consideration of the loss of her services. But no remuneration could make up for losing the happiness that she had been to us. It was like withdrawing the sunshine.'

'She was happy herself, then, in her own home, and well treated?'

'She was the apple of our eyes, and knew it. She was not spoilt, mind you, for she was a sort of girl you couldn't spoil; but, as far as our humble means went, she was what you might call indulged, and wanted for nothing. As bright as a partridge's eye, as gladsome as a lark, and with no more knowledge of evil than a young rabbit, she was the idol of us both. I seem to see her now before me.'

Here, overcome by natural emotion, or the unaccustomed difficulties of imaginary composition, Mr. John Beeton paused, and passed the back of his hand across his mouth, as though that for which he longed had been supplied to him.

'For both our sakes, my lady,' he presently resumed, 'it is better that I should cut this part of my story short. It will be enough to say, that under this roof, that angelic young creature fell a victim to someone's snares. It is unnecessary to mention names. If you have any doubt about it, or of the facts, ask your husband yonder.'

The poacher jerked his bull neck and unkempt head in the Baronet's direction; but Lady Trevor took no notice of the gesture.

'And what became of this girl, your sister?'

'She died, ma'am, with her child. Many and many a time have I yearned to visit her grave; but my feelings have been too much for me, and it was also a long distance off. Think of the wrong done to her and to me, not to mention what was missed through the man, who shall be nameless, not keeping his promise!'

'How do you mean "missed," if the girl, as you say, died?'

'If she had been Lady Trevor (as she ought to have been), even for a day, should not I, as her brother, have reaped the benefit of it?'

'To be sure; I had forgotten that. But was nothing done for *you?*'

'Nothing to speak of; but I am not a fool, as my father was. Don't suppose that I am going to sell *my* girl for a hundred pounds down and a pound a week. Your son has promised to marry Jenny, and I'll hold him to it.'

'Pray explain yourself a little more clearly, sir. At present you seem to be labouring under some very grave mistake.'

'Mistake! There is no mistake about it,' continued the poacher, with angry vehemence. 'He has run away with her this very morning. Do you suppose that *that* is a thing an honest man is going to put up with a second time, from a member, too, of the same family? It is just the old game over again, only this time, let me tell you, it is going to end very differently.'

'Admitting that the girl is gone, may I ask you what grounds you have for supposing that my son has had anything to do with it?'

'Well, to begin with, where is he? If he is not here, it is easy to guess in whose company he is. Moreover, even if you produced him, that would not make a pennyworth of difference: it would only prove that he had put her somewhere, where he can go himself—those that hide can find—when this little storm shall have blown over. But it won't blow over, or it will bring this house about your heads first. Do you suppose that even the Trevors can stand a second scandal?'

'At present I know nothing about the second. What reason have you for supposing that your daughter has listened to my son at all? Did she ever tell you she had done so?'

'What does that matter? The point is that she has fled from her father's roof, and that your son has persuaded her to do it. He told me himself that he was over head and ears in love with her, and was resolved to make her his wife.'

'When did he say that?'

'Well, as late as yesterday.'

'But I thought your daughter was engaged?'

'Well, yes; there had been something of that nature, but the match was broken off.'

'By whom?'

'By common consent of all parties; there were money difficulties. But for that, of course, I should not have listened to Mr. Hugh. Even as it was, I held out against him—referred to the difference in rank between the two young people, and showed there would be obstacles. He said of course there would be obstacles—his expression was "a devil of a row"—but that he would risk that. He said his mother could be depended upon to see him through anything; those were his very words.'

She recognised them only too well; she felt that John Beeton was now telling the truth, as surely as that he had been telling lies before.

'And what did your daughter say to these proposals?'

'Nothing, because she never knew of them—that is,' he hastened to add, 'from me. Of course she must have known of them long ago, or she wouldn't have been so ready to run away with him. She deceived her poor father, but it was Mr. Hugh as tempted her to do it.'

'One question more, Mr. Beeton, and I have done. How was it you never told your daughter last night of what, as you say, had passed yesterday between you and your son?'

'Well, I went to the Chequers and had a drop too much, and that's the fact; and when I'm in that way I'm not in the humour for telling things.'

That also she knew to be true; it had been a habit of his (not likely to be mitigated by long indulgence) when seriously intoxicated to fall into a state of sullen silence, from which it was very dangerous to rouse him. He had returned home in that condition, probably brought about in the endeavours to drown the stings of conscience, caused by his bad behaviour toward Harry Grange as well as by his acquiescence in Hugh's plans; and Jenny, perhaps suspecting something had gone wrong between her father and her lover, had not dared to speak of the handsome offer that had been made to her, and her acceptance of it. That would account for the girl's sorrowful looks, and those glances of apprehension she had cast behind her as she sat in the cart that morning. She had not only left her home—an exile, in all probability for ever—but had done so without any communication with her father. Lady Trevor was far from blaming her; it was the course of conduct which, if not the best, was one that, under the same circumstances, she felt she would have taken herself. She knew what this man had been as a brother, and she could guess what he was as a father; and though Jenny had run away, it could hardly have been said that it was from home.

Moreover, the fact that the girl was gone and out of harm's way was an immense relief, and left her free to strike with the weapon that lay so ready to her hand.

'And that is all you have to say, Mr. Beeton,' she quietly observed.

'All, and enough too, I think,' he answered vehemently; 'but nothing to what will have to be said, unless the right thing is done to me and mine at once. My Jenny shall not go the way of her aunt, I promise you. She must have her marriage lines to show in a month at furthest. Your husband himself sees the justice of that, and has promised as much—have you not, Sir Richard?'

To this second appeal Sir Richard again made no reply; there was nothing in his face that denoted either acquiescence or its contrary, but there could be read in it a distinct return of consciousness; his eyes were fixed on his wife with an expression of piteous entreaty, that she could translate only too well. 'Fate is too much for us; let us give up the contest,' was what it said. Nevertheless, even as he looked at her calm face, so full of resolution and self-reliance, he seemed to draw from it a little courage and to listen to her as she began to speak with awakening hope.

'You have had your say, Mr. Beeton,' she said, in clear, grave tones, 'and I have listened patiently; now listen to *me*. As for your story of the past, whether it be true or not, you can scarcely expect me to discuss it: but as to your present grievance, it has absolutely no evidence save in your own imagination, as I shall show you in a few plain words.'

'Then what your son said to me yesterday afternoon was a dream, I suppose,' he put in contemptuously; 'that's pretty good to begin with.'

'I did not interrupt you, sir,' she answered haughtily, 'when you drew those pictures of yourself and family, which did your fancy such credit, and I will thank you to use a like civility to me. What my son said to you yesterday forms no part of your complaint, as I understand, and indeed it seems to have received your approbation. The question is whether your daughter has been harmed by it. In the first place, as you yourself have admitted, she knew nothing about it, and if she did know, as you are also well aware, would treat such proposals with disdain. She is in love with my housekeeper's son Harry, and until yesterday you approved of the engagement to him. As it happened, there was a sudden and unexpected call for money, which placed him in a less favourable position, and then, most basely and treacherously, you turned your back upon him. For my part, I thought it very hard that your daughter's future life was to be shadowed, and perhaps wrecked, by this pecuniary misfortune, of which, with many tears, she informed me. If you had been in your right mind last night when you got home, she would have told you that I had placed the money in her own hands, and also made arrangements for her leaving this place—where, according to your own showing, she might be subject to unwelcome im-

portunity—for London. She went thither this morning, not with my son, as you falsely and ignorantly suggest, but with her future mother-in-law, Mrs. Grange, with whom she will remain until her marriage.'

'It's a lie! It's all a put-up job!' exclaimed the poacher hoarsely.

'I dare say it is difficult for you to understand an action that is done for another's good,' was the cold rejoinder. 'You are also doubtless disappointed at the break-up of a scheme which, though ruinous to those chiefly concerned, would have had its advantages for yourself. If you really have any doubts, however, of the facts of the case, you have only to apply to Mr. Smug, who is in full possession of them. An apology for your conduct I do not expect. Indeed, I am willing to admit that you had some cause for suspicions which, if well founded, would have fully justified your intrusion here, but I must now request your immediate withdrawal. Sir Richard, as you perceive, has suffered from the shock which such intelligence as yours could hardly have failed to inflict upon one in his delicate state of health, and your presence cannot be otherwise than painful to him.'

She rang the bell, while her antagonist still stood sullen and stupefied, convinced against his will.

'Take Mr. Beeton to the servants' hall,' she said to the footman, 'and see that he has some refreshment.'

Her visitor walked out without a word. It was a capitulation without even a protest.

'He is gone,' said Lady Trevor, exchanging her haughty tone for one of extreme tenderness; 'we shall never more have any trouble with him.'

Sir Richard shook his head.

'You will have nothing else but trouble,' he murmured.

It was something to know that her husband had once more his wits about him, but his depression in that moment of victory was of ill augury indeed. If she could but have seen her brother alone, all, or almost all, would now have been well; but she trembled to think what mischief had been done before she came to the rescue.

'Open the window,' muttered the sick man.

The fresh air, laden with the incense of the morning, seemed to revive him a little. 'Where is he gone?' he asked.

'What does it signify, dear Richard? What matters it where the adder goes that has been deprived of its sting?'

'The adder! Yes, the serpent that has been nourished in our bosom. No trouble with him! That will be only in the grave! where the wicked cease from troubling; and—what is worse than all, Nannie—we dare not say "God help us!"'

Then Lady Trevor understood that her husband's mind—shaken as it seemed to its foundations—was not concerning itself with their late visitor at all, but with his son Hugh.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A PROFESSIONAL OPINION.

In country places where there are no telegraph wires, rumour has other means of disseminating itself. It flies as fast, though not as far, without any aid from science. Wherever it alights it spreads, but not as it came : it derives addition, and even substance, by contact with the Arcadian ear. This is especially the case with ill tidings : a case of fever in one hamlet becomes in the next an epidemic ; an accident swells to a catastrophe. Thus it happened, within a few hours of Dr. Wood having been sent for to Mirbridge Court, and finding its proprietor suffering from 'nervous prostration,' he was reported at Catesby to have had a fit of apoplexy, and in the county town, ten miles beyond, to be deceased. Opinion, no doubt, even went further, and still less favourably for the poor Baronet, for the Trevors had a bad record in religious circles. As a matter of fact, however, if his physical ailment was magnified by the haze of distance, it was made less of at home than was its due. Who of us have not acquaintances who, after an absence from the club of a month or two (which seems a week), come back and almost puzzle us as to whether it is really the same man or not? 'Yes, I have been away at Mentone' (the voice sounds unfamiliar too). 'I had quite a sharp attack, they tell me ; but I am all right again now.' It does not need that compromising phrase, 'they tell me,' to let us into his sad secret. Dr. Wood, of course, notwithstanding his youth and spick-and-span appearance (which contrasted so unfavourably with that of old Shrapnel), was not deceived for an instant, when once he had set eyes on his patient, by poor Lady Trevor's account of matters. Sir Richard had risen much earlier than usual (she had explained to him), without the precaution of taking any nourishment, and had had rather an irritating interview (probably about the game) with that troublesome fellow, John Beeton. She had found him quite excited ; and then again, when the man had gone, his strength had seemed to fail him, and he had wandered in his mind a little—which, indeed, she was afraid, was still the case ; so she had persuaded him to go to bed.

'Quite right,' said Mr. Wood, smiling encouragingly in his best professional manner, but with a grave face too. 'Rest is the one thing needful to him just at present.—Feel better now you're between the sheets already, don't you, Sir Richard?'

'Where the weary are at rest,' moaned the sick man, with closed eyes.

'Apposite to a certain extent, you see, and yet, as your ladyship was remarking, not quite himself,' said the doctor in low tones. 'The speech, too, a little thicker than one could wish. You are sure there was no *shock?*'

'Nothing that could be called such to a man in health, Mr. Wood. How could it be so?'

'True, no subject of sufficient importance, you would say, could have been mooted; the nervous system, however, has been agitated; to a person in Sir Richard's condition any excitement, even irritation, may be very harmful.'

The doctor busied himself in certain professional examinations, wrote out a prescription, and handed it to Lady Trevor. She received it mechanically, and took up the conversation at the point where it had been broken off.

'There must be no excitement, you say; I have your authority, therefore, to prohibit anyone from approaching Sir Richard whose presence may have that effect?'

'Most certainly you have; you are the best judge, of course, of all that.'

'But I do not want to have more responsibility than is necessary.'

'Very natural.' He was wondering, nevertheless, what she meant.

'Sick men have the strangest fancies,' she said.

'Quite true.' Now he thought he saw his way. The relations between Sir Richard and his elder son were not unknown to him. 'Sometimes even their dearest and nearest, Lady Trevor, become obnoxious to them. It is painful, of course, for those concerned, but consideration for the patient should be paramount. In Sir Richard's case freedom from worry—however imaginary may be its cause—is essential.'

She bowed her head assentingly. The moment seemed very appropriate for closing the interview. Mr. Wood, however, hesitated; he had great confidence in himself professionally, but he was also conscientious.

'If a second opinion, Lady Trevor, would be any satisfaction to you——' he began.

'Not unless you think it advisable,' she put in quickly; 'I have every trust in your skill and judgment, and, other things being equal, I prefer a friend to a stranger.'

She held out her hand, and the young doctor pressed it gratefully. 'What a charming woman she is,' he thought to himself, unaware that at the same time he told her so with his eyes. There was certainly a grace in high-born ladies peculiarly their own, and which clung to them even under the most distressing circumstances.

'I shall look in again in the evening, Lady Trevor.'

'I had taken that for granted, Mr. Wood. Please to consider yourself in constant attendance; I ask it for my own sake as well as Sir Richard's.'

These words to the young doctor were sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. Such a 'paying case' as that of his present patient had never fallen to his lot before. He was still making his way in the district—from the attics downwards—and only in a few instances had he been entrusted single-handed with sick persons of importance. To be known to be in attendance at the Court would be as useful to him as the Royal Arms over a tradesman's door. But, to do him justice, this was the least among the subjects for congratulation that presented themselves to him. He prized far higher the proffered friendship of Lady Trevor. It would improve his social position immensely; an ambition which in his case was not of the usual kind. In spite of what Miss Lucy had told him respecting his chances with her sister, he had still a lingering hope in that direction, and with Lady Trevor to give him a helping hand there would surely be no cause for despair; and he had reason to believe that she would be glad to do it.

The relations between Hugh and Clara were dimly known to him. He was aware that the young man was in love with her, which, indeed, was natural enough; though that she could ever stoop to such a nature as Hugh Trevor's he did not believe. But it was clear his mother thought differently of the matter, and feared the stooping would come from the other side. Up to the present time the terms of Mr. Wood's acquaintance with Lady Trevor had forbidden him to speak with her upon his own affairs, but he felt that she was now to be his friend. He was sorry for Sir Richard, but it is an ill wind, indeed, that blows nobody good, and that is especially the case with those who follow the medical profession.

He had schooled his features, however, to assume the proper gravity on quitting the sick-room, and had answered the butler's questions about his master with due decorum.

'There is nothing much the matter, I hope, Cadman.'

To which Cadman had answered,

'I hope not, sir, I'm sure,' in a tone of unmistakable disappointment. But when Mr. Wood found himself in the avenue his face relaxed considerably, and he gave the reins not only to his hard-worked steed, which instantly assumed a funereal pace, but also to satisfactory reflection. Immersed in thought, he was startled by the animal's coming suddenly to a full stop, while the accent of the very person of whom he was dreaming broke like unseen music upon his ear.

'Forgive my playing the highwayman,' said Clara Thorne, in

allusion to the hand she had laid upon his bridle, 'but I could not let you pass without asking you how matters were going with poor Sir Richard. We have heard the most dreadful things, which, however, now that I have seen you, I no longer believe.'

'Why so?' he answered, smiling. 'You are very clever, Miss Clara, but surely not clever enough to make a diagnosis of a patient merely from the sight of his doctor.' He felt that he was trifling with a grave subject, yet could not resist the temptation of thus prolonging an interview that seemed like a foretaste of heaven.

'I don't think such a kind-hearted man as yourself would have looked so cheerful if things had been so very bad,' she said. 'I remember dear old Dr. Shrapnel used to be perfectly miserable if he thought one of his patients was, as he termed it, "likely to slip through his fingers."'

At this Mr. Wood looked grave enough; he did not at all relish the association of ideas that had suggested this allusion to his predecessor; he did not wish—though nothing under the circumstances could be more unreasonable—that the young lady should be just now regarding him in the light of a doctor at all.

'If I looked cheerful, Miss Clara, it must be because I had a presentiment of meeting you.'

'It did not prevent you from almost riding over me,' she answered drily; 'an incident which might have increased your practice, but could hardly be called professional. Now be so good as to tell me what has really happened at the Court?'

It was clear to him that she was angry; she put the question, not as before, in the way of favour, but as one who expects amends for an impertinence. What a fool he had made of himself, and how deservedly he had been punished!

'There is nothing much the matter with Sir Richard at present, Miss Clara,' he answered humbly. 'He has had an attack of nervous exhaustion, from which he is already rallying, and will, I hope, be soon himself again.'

'That is not a very sanguine expectation, I fear, is it, Mr. Wood?' she spoke in earnest pitiful tones, which somehow seemed to invite his confidence.

'He must always be more or less of an invalid,' he answered. 'His constitution is somewhat shattered.'

'Poor man.' She put her fingers upon the horse's mane, and lowered her voice.

He bent down to hear her, and his hand touched hers, and sent a thrill through him.

'You are telling me the truth about him, of course, but is it the whole truth?'

'He has had a shock, no doubt, Miss Clara.' From the voice

of the speaker it would seem that he had had one too, for it trembled and was scarcely audible.

'I guessed as much ; of course, I have no right to pry into a professional secret—forgive me.'

'There is nothing to forgive.'

He pressed her hand, and she did not withdraw it ; he had never been so near her before. Secret ? He would have told the secrets of the whole parish in exchange for the permission to tell his own.

'What brought it on ? I mean his seizure. There must have been excitement of some kind, I suppose.'

'Yes. A very little is sufficient under certain circumstances to drive a man mad.'

'Mad ? Is, then, his brain affected ?'

'No, no. Did I say "mad ?" I meant when things are in a delicate poise, a very little will throw them off their balance.'

'But what *was* it ?'

'Some talk, I believe, with John Beeton.'

'Yes, go on,' she added earnestly.

'I know nothing more. I suppose Sir Richard was irritated by his impertinence : Beeton is, as you are doubtless aware, a very impudent fellow.'

'That is his character, no doubt. There was some quarrel between them, I suppose.'

'Well, so it struck me, but as Lady Trevor reminded me, that could hardly be the case, considering their relative positions.'

'Is poor Lady Trevor aware,' inquired Clara, after a pause, 'of the seriousness of her husband's case ?'

'I think so, though she tried to conceal it. Her behaviour was admirable. It is said that the best wives are English, but if so, she is the exception that proves the rule. Indeed, it is curious, but when deeply moved, she seems to lose her French nature, as it were, altogether.'

'How so ?'

'Well, all that air of fashion—for, to do her justice, I am sure it is not haughtiness—disappeared during our interview ; and, it may be fancy, but even in her talk I could detect no longer a trace of a French accent.'

'I have noticed the same thing myself,' said Clara. 'Lady Trevor seems to become more and more English every day, as indeed it is only natural she should do.'

'Yet her son will never be an Englishman,' observed Mr. Wood.

'Why do you say that ?' she withdrew her hand from the horse's mane, and looked up in the doctor's face for the first time.

It was a large question, and one that he had not expected, though he had invited it.

'I only say what everybody says,' he answered boldly ;

'though Mr. Hugh makes such a fuss about the game, he can't shoot, and as for his riding, though it is true he has pluck enough, he rides like a tailor.'

'You didn't tell Lady Trevor *that*, I suppose,' she remarked drily.

'Well, of course not.'

'Then why should you tell *me*?'

Mr. Wood smoothed his moustaches nervously; he did not drag at them (she noticed to herself), as Hugh did when *he* was in a temper.

'It slipped out,' he answered doggedly.

'It was rather indiscreet of you,' she replied with a smile, and again she placed her hand upon the horse's mane, almost invitingly; he dared not touch it this time, but he felt that he was forgiven: and considering the nature of his offence—or rather the subject of it—the fact was most significant and full of promise. If he had not been aware of the theory of the circulation of the blood, his sensations would have informed him of it.

'I am not an impulsive person, Mr. Wood, and can be trusted,' she continued softly; 'nothing "slips out" from me, though I am a woman. Like you, I admire Lady Trevor exceedingly, and will do what I can to comfort her; but for that purpose I ought to know how matters really stand with her. Sir Richard, I conclude, has had a stroke?'

'Something of that nature; that's the truth; still, he's getting over it.'

'I am delighted to hear it; but I suppose he will now be liable to attacks of the same nature.'

'Well, yes, poor fellow, when one's horse has once fallen down, you know,' and he put his hand upon the mane, where hers still lay, to illustrate his observation, 'there is a probability that he may fall again.'

'And the second stroke,' she continued, taking no notice of his metaphor, 'is more to be dreaded than the first, is it not?'

'In Sir Richard's case it would probably be fatal.' The importance of the communication excused a gentle pressure of the fingers that he now held in his own; it was returned in a most unexpected manner—by her shaking hands with him.

'I am ever so much obliged to you, Mr. Wood,' she said, 'for your professional confidence; though what you have said has but corroborated my own apprehensions. If ever a good word from me—whether at the Court or elsewhere—can be of use to you, you shall have it.'

She had always been haughty to him, and even supercilious, but she had never before ventured to be patronising.

It was indeed a wretched awakening from his Fool's Paradise

'She only wanted to know how soon Hugh Trevor is likely to enter into his kingdom,' he muttered bitterly, as he turned round in his saddle and watched the girl's noble figure as it moved swiftly towards the Court. 'She has used my honest love as a stepping-stone to her own selfish ends.'

Here he did her wrong. Clara still thought that he was enamoured of her sister, and that he had merely given way to the temptation of a little gallantry with herself, for which, though she had for the moment encouraged it for her own purposes, he had received a well-merited rebuke. She was not angry with him for his audacity ; she was too much accustomed to see men of all degrees fall at her feet to think very much of that ; but his criticism on Hugh—made, as it obviously had been, with a personal reference to herself—she resented exceedingly. There were obstacles enough to overcome before she could attain the object of her ambition without gratuitous and authorized opposition such as this. She did not want to hear the opinion of the crowd about a matter on which she had made up her mind.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ON HIS KNEES.

If all the selfish people in the world had the sagacity to do as well for themselves as they intend to do, it would be bad for the rest of us. Fortunately their very egotism interferes with their well-being in all directions except that of money-getting. Your miser is a triumphant success from first to last : his youth has but one dream, and age, so far from quenching it, adds to its flame. But your mere man of pleasure, than whom no more selfish creature exists, is wont to throw away many chances beside the main one, from sheer incapacity for self-denial. Mr. Hugh Trevor, for example, had as fixed an intention to get everything there was to be got for himself, at whatever cost to other people, as any young fellow of his years ; but, with all his selfishness, he had no self-restraint, without which a permanent prosperity is unattainable. His honest nature despised plots and stratagems, save those which presented themselves on the instant, for the immediate attainment of his ends. 'The best of everything was good enough for him,' but it was necessary he should have it at once ; and this impatience—an attribute of Royal blood, but not so practicable in other people—often prevented his getting it.

The contempt with which Jenny Beeton had treated his attentions had wounded his *amour propre ;* his anger had also been aroused by certain remonstrances which Mr. Gurdon had ventured to make to him on this subject ; and it was as much from

pique as passion that he had promised her father to marry her. He did not mean to do it if he could help it, which John Beeton also clearly understood, and hence his suspicions when he found his daughter had left his roof. Unaware of what had really happened, Hugh had nevertheless connected the poacher's visit to the Court with this delicate subject. He concluded that Honest John (as he had been christened in the tap-room by someone not unpossessed of a rudimentary sense of humour) had on the whole thought more was to be made by making a clean breast of it to Sir Richard than by holding to his bargain with himself, or, in other words, that he had sold him.

He was transported with rage at this breach of faith—a thing which annoys your rogue in the concrete much more than your moralist in the abstract—but was also filled with fear. Sooner or later he knew that the broad lands of Mirbridge must get into his own hands; but, in the meantime, he was dependent on the liberality of his father. Hitherto, thanks to the influence of his mother, this had been without stint; but it was quite possible that not only she might be unable to gloss over to Sir Richard such an affair as this, but that she might be unwilling to do so. He had told John Beeton that he could wind his mother round his little finger, and it was no idle boast; but there were some things concerning which she was not so pliable. If she resented his flirtations with Clara Thorne, what would she say to his promise to marry Jenny Beeton? If he had done it, indeed, she would without doubt have moved heaven and earth to procure his father's forgiveness. From the nettle Danger he would have then plucked the flower Safety; but now there was no such urgent demand for her intervention. He well knew the hopes she entertained for his making a good marriage, though ignorant of the pressing reasons that prompted them for his own sake; and that, in doing what he had done, he had wounded her where she would feel it most. For the first time in his life he looked forward to meeting her with apprehension. The delay in her return increased his fears. The breakfast-hour had long arrived, but he remained upstairs in his own sitting-room unsummoned. There was nothing unusual in that, for it was his habit to be late, and no one ever ventured upon intruding on his privacy. He would have given much for a word with Gurdon, though he had now little liking for that gentleman, or even with his brother Charles. They could have at least told him what had taken place. Again and again he had heard the clatter of hoofs in the courtyard, the going and returning of the groom who had been sent for the doctor, and the doctor's arrival and departure; but the idea of anything being the matter in the way of illness had not occurred to him. He was not ill himself, and therefore there was no association of ideas to suggest it; he

only vaguely felt that there was something wrong, and very wrong, in connection with his own affairs.

As hunger can tame a lion, so prolonged anxiety has a subjugating influence upon a most selfish nature. While awaiting the return of the jury you may see the muscles of his back at work—however he may brave it out elsewhere—in the most hardened criminal. If his mother had come back to him at once, Hugh had made up his mind how to receive her: he would have growled out, 'Well, and what's up?' in the tones, if not of injured innocence, of one who has committed a peccadillo which has been absurdly magnified into a serious offence. But when at last she did come, with a look of displeasure upon her white face such as he had never seen there before, he rose from his chair alarmed, and with genuine solicitude inquired, 'What on earth has happened, mother?'

'A great misfortune,' she answered sternly; 'Heaven only knows how great, and it lies at your door.'

That last phrase comforted him a little; for a misfortune at one's door is not like a misfortune that happens to one's self. A miss in such a case is almost as good as a mile.

'How so?' he asked, with much more of conciliation in his manner, however, than he was in the habit of using.

'The news John Beeton brought with him this morning has well-nigh killed your father.'

'What news?'

It did not escape Lady Trevor that Hugh had replied to that part of her observation only that concerned himself, notwithstanding the nature of the tidings involved in the other. For an instant she saw her son as he really was.

'If you have a heart, Hugh, which I begin to doubt,' she replied significantly, 'it is a hard one.'

'Nay, mother, that is not so,' he answered, with a pretence at cheerfulness. 'I'm sorry if the governor has been upset about me, if that is what you mean; but if it is so, it is the softness of my heart that has done it. I know that I am too impressionable as regards the fair sex, and own at once that I was nearly making a fool of myself regarding Jenny Beeton. But there, since you take it to heart so much, I will never speak to the girl again, I give you my word of honour.'

'That is a very small thing to say, even if you mean it,' she answered sternly. 'She has gone out of harm's way—and yours—for ever.'

'Great Heaven! Is she dead?' he said.

For the first time his speech had feeling in it. There was even sympathy in his awestruck tones. The picture of the girl so full of life but yesterday, with life gone out of her, had presented itself to his mind, and, callous as it was, it shrank from

the contemplation of it. This touch of tenderness, while it weakened his own defence, by no means softened his mother towards him ; he could be affected then, it seemed, by the supposed loss of the plaything he had designed for himself, but to hear that his father was struck down on what might be his death-bed, and by his own unfilial hand, had moved him not a whit.

Next to this unworthy son of hers, Lady Trevor loved her husband, and the recollection of how she had just left him, pale and speechless, with that far-off look on his face which seems to say 'Good-bye' to the world, was dragging at her heart-strings.

'The girl is not dead ; but I would that she had never been born,' she answered vehemently. 'Did you not hear what I said about your father ?'

'Well, of course ; and did not I say that I was sorry ?' he answered doggedly. 'In his present state it takes very little to upset him, no doubt, or else I don't know what has happened that there should be such a fuss about it. There is no such great harm in flirting with a pretty girl, I suppose, especially when nothing has come of it ; when the governor was my age, if all tales be true, he was not so immaculate himself.'

White to the lips, Lady Trevor sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands. Never, surely, had reproach so bitter fallen from a thoughtless tongue. For a moment she was overwhelmed by it ; her sin, as it seemed, for the first time had found her out, and was inflicting on her retribution indeed. The next moment the thought of what this weakness might cost her by arousing her son's suspicions flashed upon her mind, and galvanized her failing powers into life. Fortunately, Hugh, alarmed by her sudden prostration, was only solicitous to excuse himself. The observation he had made would have been disrespectful, and in the worst taste, at any time, but, as he now perceived, must have been especially objectionable on account of his father's condition.

'I am sorry I said anything to distress you,' he murmured apologetically ; and then, after a pause, 'Is the governor really so very ill ?'

There was something, not only of incredulity, in the ring of his voice, but of indifference, and even harshness, which stung his mother to the quick, and, as an insult gives courage to the coward, moved her to unwonted action. Now was the time, it struck her—now, if ever, now when his spirit was at the lowest—to make terms with her unruly son.

'Your father is very ill,' she answered, 'and it behoves you, for your own sake, to make amends for your past ill-conduct to him—crowned as it is by this last act of reckless folly—while there is yet time.'

'I don't know what you would have,' he answered with a piqued irritation, through which, however, could easily be perceived a note of alarm. 'What can a fellow say more than that he is sorry, and that the thing shall not occur again?' Then, when she kept silence, he added, with undisguised anxiety, 'What do you mean by "for my own sake"?'

'I was simply appealing to your self-interest, since that, it seems, is the only thing that has weight with you,' she answered coldly. '*My* wishes have long been as dust in the balance, but you may find too late that in flying in the face of your father you have injured your prospects beyond redemption.'

'I know what my prospects are, well enough,' he answered stubbornly.

'You think you do, no doubt, and are even calculating, unnatural boy, upon the nearness of their realization.'

His face flushed with the consciousness of detected guilt, as he stammered out some vague denial.

'I wish I could believe you, Hugh,' was her reproachful reply. 'It is terrible to feel that the loss with which you are threatened should be associated with the thought of gain. Discard it from your heart, I warn you, lest it end—as it deserves to do—in disappointment and ruin.'

The colour fled from his cheek, and left it pale with fear.

'Come, that's all nonsense about ruin,' he murmured uneasily. 'I know what my own position is well enough.'

'That is just what you do not,' she answered firmly. 'It is an argument which I have no right to employ, and for the use of which I, at this moment, blame my foolish fondness—but as sure as you stand there, Hugh Trevor, you may find yourself to-morrow penniless and disinherited, if you do not mend your ways.'

'Oh, come, I'm not going to be frightened by rubbish of that kind,' he replied defiantly; 'do you suppose Morris doesn't know?'

'Ask Morris at your peril. Ask your father, and as surely as the sun is in heaven you will hear what you would give your right hand not to be true. I say again that I do wrong in thus putting you on your guard. It is a breach of confidence beyond which I dare not go, though, if I did dare, it would bring you to your knees. You disbelieve me still?'

On the shelf near her there was a Bible; in old Sir Marmaduke's time every bedroom had been provided with one, though in Hugh's case it was probably a superfluous article of furniture. She took it down and kissed it.

'So help me heaven,' she cried, 'what I have told you is the truth!'

'But you have told me nothing,' he said.

'I have told you all I dare, and more than I ought to tell.'

Hugh's face was livid with rage and fear; fear had the upper hand, for he believed his mother's words—but his currish nature prompted him to strike where no blow would be returned. 'And for how much of this have I to thank *you?*' he snarled. It was a mere brutal outbreak, with no intention of any definite indictment; but the cruel dart went home. She answered nothing—only gazed at him despairingly, with beating heart and parted lips. He took her silence, as well he might, for passionate reproach, and felt that he had gone too far. 'Of course I know it is not your fault,' he continued grudgingly; 'but you surely must have known of this, and might have warned me.'

She shook her head.

'Then what is to be done?'

'Nothing; only be careful not to undo yourself. Take your own path, as you have hitherto done, and it must lead to ruin. Be guided by me, and all may yet be well.'

'That means you want to have your own way.'

'It does—but for your sake.'

'All right: I'll say anything you please to the governor—apologize for anything—promise anything.'

'You must not go near your father; to speak to him would be fatal—I mean to *you*,' she added quickly.

'Then I'll not go near him, that's easily settled,' he answered stolidly.

'Moreover, you must do nothing contrary to his wishes.'

'I'll be careful of that, of course.' He spoke with the air of a man with whom solicitude to please his parents was the rule of life.

'Yet it was only yesterday that you contemplated a low marriage.'

'Well, that's all over. The girl's as good as dead so far as I'm concerned.'

'Yes, but there is another girl—in a different position, it is true—but a union with whom would seriously injure your future. You must cease your attentions to Clara Thorne.'

It was a bold stroke, and if matters had not been so well prepared for it, it would, without doubt, have beaten the air. Even as it was, Hugh hesitated, and wore his most dogged look.

'What's the matter with *her?*' he muttered. 'She's "good enough," I suppose, for anybody.' It was probable that he was not referring to the young lady's moral perfections, but to the social estimation in which she was universally held, and in this sense Lady Trevor took his remonstrance.

'That is a matter there is no necessity to discuss,' she said. 'I might point out that your position in the county would be injured by such a marriage; that she has no money, and so on,

and it is quite likely that you would despise such arguments. The point is whether, on the very threshold of ruin, you will step back or forward. It is not a question of my wish, remember, this time!'

'I don't want to be obstinate,' said Hugh doggedly. If a mule resolved not to move, or a pig bent upon going the other way, could have expressed submission in human speech, it would have used the same tone. 'And if you are bent upon it, mother——'

'You may leave me out of the question,' she put in coldly. 'It is a matter for your own consideration, Hugh. The day has gone by for offering you advice, or asking you to do anything to please me; but, as it seems to me, no great sacrifice is demanded of you. If you were ready to marry somebody else, yesterday, your affections cannot be seriously engaged with this young lady. Nobody can be in love with two persons at once.'

'Oh, can't they, though, by Jingo!' he answered, with the contempt of sincere conviction. 'What do you suppose people do in Mahomedan countries, where they have fifty wives?'

There was really something of logic in this rejoinder, but Lady Trevor ignored it.

'At all events, do I understand you to promise that matters shall go no further between you and Miss Thorne?'

'Yes, I do;—so far as I am concerned,' he added, as if moved by an after-thought.

'Then I will answer for the affair so far as *she* is concerned, observed Lady Trevor drily. 'As your affections are now free, I hope you will permit them to take a less detrimental channel than they have hitherto followed. There is no menace in what I am going to say, but I must merely point out to you that the easiest way out of this very perilous position in which you have brought yourself, is to make yourself independent of all external circumstances by marrying a woman of fortune.'

'Such as Miss Mumchance, I suppose,' remarked Hugh grimly.

'I was not thinking of Miss Mumchance particularly'—the last word, a tribute to the shrine of truth, was uttered with a little flush—'but she would be an excellent match for you. Miss Thorne tells me she is coming over to the Rectory this week, where, of course, you will have the opportunity of seeing her.'

'To the Rectory?' said Hugh irresolutely. It struck him, audacious though he was, that it would be a little awkward to pay his attentions to Miss Mumchance under Clara's eye.

Lady Trevor perceived his hesitation and guessed its reason. It was a bitter thought that her son feared this girl's displeasure far more than her own. But she had had to endure many such.

'I will take Miss Clara Thorne into my own hands,' she said

significantly. 'The course will be quite cleared for you; you will only have to make the running.'

'All right,' he answered gloomily. 'Don't say I have not done everything to please you.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CLARA GAINS AN ALLY.

To outsiders, the fact of a worthless personage (or one whom they take to be such) being 'put up with' by his belongings at all is always a matter of surprise, while they treat the idea of his being beloved by any of them with scornful incredulity. One exception, indeed, they are willing to admit, that of a man's mother—she is not, they allow, in a position to judge of him, and is the mere slave of instinct; but as for all other women, 'his sisters, his cousins, and his aunts,' it is impossible that they can entertain any real regard for him. To those, however, who are acquainted with human nature, this is an error in judgment. Love may be a very simple affair, and generally is so; but the causes that produce it are sometimes exceedingly complex.

I once knew a lady, who, when in India, was much attached to a cheetah—not a man so called (though that, too, is by no means unparalleled), but a hunting leopard. It was an ill-tempered, snarling creature, not even beautiful, for it always had a sort of mange, such as is fabled to attack man-eating tigers, and was the terror of all who were honoured with even its distant acquaintance; but with his mistress he was as tame as a domestic cat, and therefore she liked him. (He bit her at last, but that's neither here nor there.) There was no other reason on earth, except that, why she should have liked him. It pleased her to see that, though fierce and intractable with others, he would smooth his claws, and at times rub his mangy ears against her delicate fingers. He would growl and show his teeth now and then even at her; but when she said, 'Down, down, Turco,' he would 'back down' and become amenable. The lady's love was an exceptional one, for hunting leopards, I am thankful to say, are not to be found in every bush; but there are human Turcos in plenty who find women to love them.

It was for a similar reason, *I think*—for the female heart is really an enigma beyond man's feeble powers to solve, one can only guess at it—that Clara Thorne loved Hugh Trevor. Perhaps the word is too strong a one: but she certainly liked him a great deal more than 'the intelligent reader' or myself can conceive possible. Lady Trevor was altogether wrong in supposing that the girl had no other eyes for him than those with which we regard prospective property—something which we

have made up our minds shall become our own. That was how she had looked upon him at first, no doubt; but the consciousness that she was the only human being of whom he stood in fear had somehow endeared him to her. He was the captive of her bow and spear, and she took not only a pardonable pride in her victory, but, what seems less accountable—since she thoroughly understood him—in the man himself. His obstinacy, his violence, his selfishness, and even his brutality—all his vices, save one, were recognised by her quite clearly. She looked at them through no haze of love or weakness, as his mother did, but saw them in their true colours. Moreover, she had very little hope of reforming him—she thought it improbable that her leopard would ever change its spots; but she did think that she could tame him.

To Lucy, who was to a certain extent her confidante, this was a source of much unhappiness. 'If you marry that man,' she once said to her, 'you will become his slave.'

'No, my dear, it will be the other way; he will become mine.' was her quiet reply.

It was sometimes with difficulty, notwithstanding all her self-restraint, that she could keep her temper with him. On one occasion, when she had referred to the affection his brother entertained for Lucy, he had answered contemptuously, 'What is the use of it all? She can't marry a pauper.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to exclaim, 'How brutal you are!' but she only said to herself, 'When I am your wife, I will see that Charles is not a pauper.' The desire to benefit her sister was indeed one of the motives that impelled her towards Hugh; but without any idea of self-sacrifice. She thought she should be as happy with him as, on the whole, she had expected to be with a husband. 'Love in a hut, with water and a crust,' would not, she knew, at all have suited her: and it was unreasonable to suppose that so desirable a *parti* as the heir to a baronetcy, with a large rent-roll, should not have his drawbacks. Lady Trevor's manifest dislike to her designs rather incited her to prosecute them than otherwise: she had little liking for intrigue, but a great relish for combat; and opposition roused her like the blast of a trumpet.

She by no means underrated her ladyship's intelligence or strength of character; and while Sir Richard lived she was well aware that his wife held very strong cards against her. If he should die, however, Clara made no doubt of winning the game, and from Dr. Wood's account of the matter it seemed that victory was not only probable, but very near.

Clara Thorne was by no means heartless, and as she approached the Court, about which there was already an unusual silence—the hush of catastrophe—she felt a sincere sorrow not only for the

sufferer, but for her antagonist, his wife. The butler, whose face fully corroborated the doctor's fears, offered no obstacle to her admittance. Conscious as he was of being the depository of a secret at present confined to the members of the household, and jealous of the approach of outsiders on an occasion so flattering to his self-importance, Mr. Cadman was no more able to withstand the allurements of beauty than his betters.

'Well, miss, I doubt whether her ladyship will be at liberty to see you, but both the young gentlemen are within, and also Mr. Gurdon.'

'I think I should like to speak with one of them just for a moment, Cadman,' she answered apologetically, as though all the information that could be required by any reasonable being had not been already placed at her disposal; whereupon he ushered her into the breakfast-room, where, late as it was, Mr. Gurdon was still discussing his morning meal.

It was with no affectation of gloom that the young fellow imparted to her what little he had to tell of his host's illness. He was not only grateful to Sir Richard for his hospitality, but had a sincere liking for him, and he spoke as he felt upon the matter.

'You find me eating like a pig, Miss Clara, but one can't help one's swinish nature, and I can't tell you how sorry I am for what has happened.'

'I am very sure you are sorry, Mr. Gurdon.'

'Yes, indeed, and upon my own account also (which is swinish again), for with illness in the house I feel that a stranger and a sojourner like myself must needs be in the way here, and it grieves me to have to say good-bye to the many kind friends that I have found at Mirbridge.'

'But you must forgive me for saying that your going away will be a very poor return to them, Mr. Gurdon. It is when we are in trouble that friends are most needed, and just now you would be missed, I am certain, more than ever. You are not one to be inconvenienced because the domestic machinery is thrown out of gear a little.'

'Inconvenienced! Why, bless my soul, if I had to fry my own bacon for breakfast,' he replied, looking round upon the ample repast before him, 'it would not matter to me one penny.'

'Then think of what a relief it will be to Lady Trevor, engaged in her sad duties above stairs, to feel that she has a valued friend in the house, on whom she can rely, and who has always exercised—or tried to exercise—his influence for good.'

Mr. Gurdon turned scarlet, not at the compliment, but at the allusion to Hugh Trevor which it involved. The friend who had introduced him to Mirbridge had now become less his friend than any of those he had found there, and this was mainly due to the efforts he had made 'to keep Hugh straight;' with some of them

Miss Clara was doubtless acquainted; but of one of them—the one which had cost Mr. Gurdon most—she was certainly ignorant.

'If I could persuade myself that I could be of any real use to Lady Trevor, I should be happy indeed,' he answered gravely. 'She is full of trouble, poor soul.' He was thinking of how he had seen her that very morning, haggard, dishevelled, and as it had seemed to him despairing, creeping like an outcast into her own house.

'You mean she has other troubles, beside this one,' said Clara softly. 'Poor woman! I have often thought myself that she had something on her mind.'

'Oh, I know nothing of that,' said Mr. Gurdon hastily. 'She has not made a confidant of me in any way.'

'Perhaps not; but things do not easily escape you, I know. By-the-bye, were you right concerning that picture by Romney, about which she was so interested? Is it really an original, or a copy?'

'Pray do not ask me that question, Miss Clara,' he answered in confusion. 'Lady Trevor particularly requested me not to allude to the subject to anybody.'

'Then it seems she does confide in you, just a little,' said Clara, smiling. It was difficult to do otherwise than smile, so obvious and excessive was Mr. Gurdon's embarrassment. As a general rule, he was a miracle of prudence, but there was something in Clara Thorne that loosened the tongue of every man, and drew from him what he would have concealed from another. Especially was this the case when she showed any signs of sympathy, which were rare with her.

'Lady Trevor is fortunate indeed in having such a friend as you outside her own belongings,' continued the charmer, with a little sigh.

'Oh, Miss Clara, pray don't say that—I mean, if it implies that I am not equally your friend also.'

'Well, I will at least say this much, that I do not think you would willingly do me a mischief, Mr. Gurdon.'

'A mischief! Good gracious! My dear Miss Clara, if I could advance your happiness in any way there is no sacrifice I would not make.'

'What, even if it involved offending some other friend?'

The obstacle in question was one indeed which he had lately more than once surmounted, with far less of personal interest for his motive than he felt in the present case. On the other hand, Mr. Gurdon was not perfectly straightforward in what he was saying. He knew quite well that what Clara was asking him for was his advocacy of her engagement to Hugh, and this, though he seemed to promise it, he could not give her. He salved his conscience, however, with the phrase he had used, 'If I could

advance your happiness,' for he had a firm conviction that the girl who married Hugh Trevor would bid good-bye to happiness at the church door. She was acting, he said to himself, like a child, who in her ignorance desires a sweetmeat that would not only be injurious to her, but even poisonous, and he was treating her like a child. Nevertheless, as she held out her hand to him, with something like tears of gratitude in her beautiful eyes, he took it with a pang of remorse.

Engrossed by the same train of thought, they did not notice the entrance of Mr. Cadman, who took in the situation at a glance, and utterly misread it.

'There's another of them down on his knees to her, and no wonder,' was his silent reflection ere he delivered aloud the message with which he had been entrusted.

'My lady's love, Miss Clara, and would you kindly step up into the boudoir and see her for a few minutes.'

Mr. Gurdon and Clara exchanged, involuntarily, significant glances, for though one can keep one's thoughts out of other people's hearing, one cannot always keep them out of their sight.

'I hope Lady Trevor will not consider my coming at such a time to be an intrusion,' observed Clara, with as indifferent an air as she could assume.

'Of course not; her wanting to see you is a proof with what friendly feelings she regards you,' answered Mr. Gurdon eagerly.

Clara shook her head, and faintly smiled.

'You say all that you can to comfort me, Mr. Gurdon; will you *do* all that you can to help me?'

This was only the old question, as he knew, put more directly; but what is the use of being on your guard with an adversary who breaks through your guard? Against that appealing look and tender tone he could only feebly strive.

'Your interests, dear Miss Clara,' he murmured, 'will always be mine.'

'That is as much as to say you are a better judge of them than I am,' she answered earnestly. 'Pray, pray believe me, Mr. Gurdon, when I say that is not the case. What is moving your kind heart is the thought that so far as in you lies you will save a foolish girl from herself. If you were speaking to my sister it would be different, but in my case such tender fears are thrown away; I not only know my own mind, but my own strength.'

What he would have said, had he been his own master, was: 'But you overrate it!' but with her hand upon his shoulder, and her pleading eyes looking into his own, his lips returned another reply.

'I will do *anything* to please you, Miss Clara.'

'A thousand thanks,' she murmured softly; 'you have always

been my friend, I know, and henceforth you will be also my ally.'

It was a bold stroke thus to have secured Mr. Gurdon's 'vote and influence' in a matter so delicate as her relations with Hugh Trevor, but it was one Clara had long meditated, and this was the first opportunity that had presented itself.

She had always recognised the friendly familiarity with which his hostess treated the young painter, but, from what he had just now so undesignedly let fall, it was clear to her that his opinion had even greater weight than she had imagined. It was highly desirable that it should be thrown into her side of the scale, and worth some sacrifice of self-respect.

Yet, thanks to the marvellous charm with which nature had endued her, Clara had lost nothing of dignity in Mr. Gurdon's eyes. The influence she had attributed to him was of course a compliment; but he had absolutely no vanity to be tickled by it. What had won him over to her cause was, as he honestly believed, the simple eloquence with which she had pleaded it. He would have been astonished and shocked had he recognised how greatly it had been supplemented by those dumb arguments with which Phryne of old convinced the Bench. With a jury of matrons, or an assembly of female judges *in banco*, it is probable that that young lady would have had less success; and it was not without some foreboding that she was about to plead the same cause over again before a Court by no means so favourable to her, and with whom the same weapons could avail her nothing, that Clara Thorne took her way to Lady Trevor's boudoir.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LADY TREVOR SCORES.

It may seem strange, and a proof of no little egotism in Miss Clara Thorne, that she could connect her summons from Lady Trevor in her hour of sorrow in any way with her own affairs; but her keen appreciation of her position, and habit of looking things straight in the face, had, as it happened, led her to a just conclusion.

Had it been her mother, or even Lucy, who had called at the Court to make inquiries, it was possible enough she would have allowed that Lady Trevor might have admitted them to her sanctuary, and welcomed their condolements; but her own relations with her ladyship were very different from theirs; there was, at the best, an armed neutrality between them; and though Mr. Gurdon had spoken of her being sent for as a proof of friendship, she knew that he had been only prophesying smooth things to gloss over a moment of embarrassment. A stranger,

it is written, does not intermeddle with our joy: how much less then with our sorrow; and it was as something worse than a stranger—an antagonist—that Lady Trevor, she was well aware, regarded her. Was it likely, then, that she should seek for her personal sympathy in a misfortune which, she did not doubt, had wrung her very heart-strings?

Nevertheless, when her hostess rose to meet her with her usual grace, indeed, but clothed in sadness, like a fair woman craped, and with her sweet voice tender with such a freight of woe as choked its utterance—the visitor's calculations seemed at fault, while a genuine sorrow for the other's condition almost made her ashamed of them. Lady Trevor's sleepless night, her miserable expedition of the morning, her husband's seizure, and the interview just concluded with her son, had, indeed, been enough to break down a far stronger woman. If rest had been possible to her, she would have taken it; but when news was brought her of Clara's presence in the house, she had at once resolved to see her, and put an end to one, at least, of the anxieties that were keeping sleep from her eyes. Weary and sore driven as she was, the very multitude of her troubles made another ordeal more or less indifferent to her, just as the strokes of the knout fall at last upon a body insensible to pain; nor did she, perhaps, overlook the fact that the pitiable condition in which her visitor found her, even if it failed to move her pity, must needs preclude the suspicion of duplicity or finesse.

'You have doubtless heard, dear girl, something of what has happened to my poor husband,' said Lady Trevor, taking Clara's hand in hers, and seating herself beside her on a couch.

'Yes, indeed; the sad news was told me in the village in my morning walk, and I came straight up to the Court at once, without even communicating with my people, or I should not, of course, have come alone.'

'It is just as well that you should have done so, for, as it happens, the misfortune that has overwhelmed me has no slight connection with yourself.'

'With *me?*' exclaimed Clara in astonishment.

'Yes, dear, with *you*,' and she gently pressed her hand as if in identification. 'What I am about to say will, I fear, be very unpleasant to you, but it cannot pain you to hear as it pains me to tell it; for, though you may think otherwise, dear girl—as I did myself when I was your age—there is no heart so ill able to resist a blow as that of a mother.'

This very unexpected exordium reawakened at once Clara's worst apprehensions, and though she had no idea of the road her ladyship's thoughts were taking, she had a very shrewd idea of what they were driving at. She did not dare withdraw her hand from Lady Trevor's, though the retention of it, as she felt,

placed her at a great disadvantage, since it suggested a relation of confidence and even affection, which she was now very far from feeling. Moreover, whatever was said to her, she was thereby compelled to listen to it, like one of those fashionable congregations to which the sermon is administered with the doors locked.

'What has harmed Sir Richard so seriously, and, I fear, brought him well-nigh to death's door,' continued her ladyship in broken tones, 'is, in fact, the conduct of our poor, misguided Hugh. I say our, dear Clara, out of respect for the tender regard I know you entertained for one another. I may now confess to you—just as one might speak of a dead person concerning whom such things have ceased to be—that it was a thing I never encouraged.'

'I think that could be gathered from your manner, Lady Trevor,' observed Clara, smiling, though she was, in fact, growing very angry; 'but as for what you say about a dead person, you must forgive me remarking that I am not a good hand at guessing riddles.'

'We will come to that presently, dear girl; you will be the first to admit, when you know all, that I have used no exaggerated metaphor, but since you have noticed my opposition to the growing tenderness between my son and yourself, let me frankly state the cause. That I had no objection to you personally, I hope it is not necessary to say; your family were all I could wish for in the way of connection, but what seemed to me an insuperable difficulty was your want of fortune. Hugh, it is true, would be well-off enough; but poor Charles had also to be provided for, and I need not say to you, who know his brother so thoroughly, that there would be a difficulty in persuading him to set apart any considerable sum out of his income for that purpose, unless it was greatly increased. This I hoped would be effected by some advantageous marriage, such as his position and prospects entitled him to look for. You may despise such sordid reasoning, but this was my motive, and certainly not an offensive one as regards yourself. Does it seem strange to you that I should thus sacrifice the inclinations of my elder son to the interests of my younger?'

'It seems very strange indeed to me,' was the dry rejoinder—if she had added, 'because I don't believe you care three farthings for your younger son,' the words would have been superfluous, so implied were they in her contemptuous tone.

The colour rushed to Lady Trevor's cheek, but there was no trace of anger in her voice, as she replied gently:

'You do me some injustice there, Clara, but let that pass. It may also surprise you to learn that the more my son's happiness seemed to be bound up in yours the less I felt inclined to oppose him.'

'You certainly concealed that change in your sentiments completely, Lady Trevor.'

'I endeavoured to do so, lest it should give him encouragement, and hasten what I was still anxious to avoid. But why tell me all this, you will presently say?'

'If you will forgive me for interrupting you, I say it *now*,' observed Clara coldly.

Lady Trevor gave her companion's hand a little rebukeful pressure, to which there was no response; it lay in it like a stone in a sling.

'Have patience with me, dear girl, for a little longer,' she resumed. 'I tell you all this to prove to you there was no quarrel between us, as you may have suspected, and that we were even nearer a mutual understanding than you had any idea of.'

It was very seldom that Clara Thorne permitted her temper to get the better of her, but that pressure of Lady Trevor's fingers had closed its safety-valve and compelled an explosion.

'If you are going to tell me that it is Sir Richard's objections to my engagement with your son, and not your own, that have proved insuperable to it, I shall be obliged to say that I do not believe you, Lady Trevor.'

'And you would be perfectly justified in so doing,' was the unexpected reply. 'Unhappily, the relations between my husband and his elder son are such that he has never given himself the trouble to notice the state of matters between yourself and Hugh; at all events, he has not opened his lips to me about them. Something to-day, however, has happened which has only too forcibly directed his attention to Hugh's flirtations.'

'There has been no flirtation,' put in Clara drily. 'No one can accuse me of being a flirt.'

'I am not speaking of you, my dear girl, but of another; though, as you justly remind me, "flirtation" is not the word I should have used. Hugh has promised himself in marriage to Jenny Beeton.'

Clara leapt to her feet with a sharp cry. 'To Jenny Beeton?' Amazement, incredulity, and wounded pride seemed to struggle in that passionate inquiry for the mastery.

'Yes; she was a rival, no doubt, with whom you little dreamt you would have to reckon. Conceive, then, the shock which such shameful news caused my poor husband. Can you wonder in his delicate state of health that it should have utterly prostrated him? "If your father dies, Hugh," were my last words to that unhappy boy, "his death will be at your door."'

'What, does he confess it then?' gasped Clara.

'Do you suppose I would have told you—have told anyone, but *you*, my poor child, above all, for believe me I feel for you

—unless I had had it from his own lips, and been quite sure? John Beeton, who has on the whole behaved with some propriety in the matter, called here this morning to confess the fact, which had only been revealed to him yesterday.'

'Then they are not—not married?' said Clara, in tones that trembled, but with no softer emotion than jealous rage.

'No, not yet. Of course, our hope is that that extremity of disgrace will be spared us; but even as it is, how terrible is the calamity! All other troubles—those that *you* caused me, my poor girl, for example—seem to have been nothing in comparison with them; next to ourselves, indeed—for no doubt Hugh persuaded you that he loved you—I feel for *you*.'

A shiver seized Clara's limbs; it was the first humiliation her proud spirit had known.

'It must indeed be a bitter blow,' continued Lady Trevor pitifully; 'but you have at least health and strength to bear it. I, too, have been inured to grief of which, thank Heaven, you know nothing, Clara; but his poor father—already feeble and sore stricken—think, think of what he has suffered!'

It must be pardoned to Clara Thorne that this consideration was a very secondary one compared with the pains and pangs that consumed her on her own account: though in reality convinced of the truth of her companion's terrible tidings, she still sought refuge in incredulity.

'But this girl was already engaged to Harry Grange,' she murmured.

Lady Trevor sighed and shrugged her shoulders. 'I need not remind *you*, my poor child, how little such engagements matter when passion intervenes. To do poor Jenny justice, however, she seems to have made some struggle against Hugh's importunities.'

'Then, this has been going on for some time?' said Clara huskily.

'I suppose so; what does it matter? It is only too clear that Hugh has been playing with your affections. I have not one word of excuse to offer for him.'

'Excuse!' exclaimed Clara. 'He is——'

'My son,' put in Lady Trevor quickly. 'In your just indignation, I entreat you to remember that.'

Her anger at Hugh's conduct was cooling; she had just overwhelmed him with reproaches, face to face, and had now exposed his ill-conduct to another—her affection for him had not been extinguished, but only smothered, and its flame had begun once more to rise within her maternal breast. Moreover, the reflection that the evil he had done could, thanks to her precautions, go no further, whilst at the same time it had enabled her to set him free from his entanglement with Clara, as she felt sure it would do, greatly mitigated her ire.

If no serious mischief came of it to her husband, the occurrence altogether was not so much to be deplored. She had carefully abstained from mentioning that Jenny had been sent out of Hugh's way, and hoped to obtain a renunciation of him from Clara's lips before she should learn that fact.

The idea, indeed, of the girl's being in the same village, attracting Hugh to one side of it, while she herself, but not so strongly, had attracted him to the other, was the chief bitterness in Clara's cup. She kept silence, which alarmed her companion; she did not wish her to have time for reflection, which might mean scheming, or, at all events, looking at matters in a less despairing way, and she resolved on a bold stroke.

'Hugh is within doors, Clara. Would you like to see him yourself?'

'See him! Why should I see him?' answered the other vehemently. 'I will never see him, if I can help it, so long as I live.'

'A wise conclusion, my dear Clara, and one which does you credit. To no other girl than yourself should I have made such an offer; but it struck me that if you had any lingerings of doubt as to what I have told you, it would be better to cast them out at once and for ever, lest they should breed once more a false hope. I am glad that you have spared yourself so cruel an ordeal. In what I had to say to Hugh about his shameless conduct, I did not spare my reproaches with respect to his behaviour to yourself. He made, I am sorry to say, no sort of apology, and in answer to my inquiry as to what his course would be if he could escape from his present position, he informed me in the plainest terms that all between you and him would be at an end so far as he was concerned.'

'Did he say *that?*' inquired Clara, with flashing eyes.

'Those were his very words, dear girl, upon my honour. I thought at the time that they were both uncalled for and unkind.'

'They were as false as they were cowardly, Lady Trevor. It was he sought me, and not I him.'

'That is likely enough,' replied the other, in a tone, however, that had less of assent in it than indifference; 'but it was hardly worth while to argue the matter with him. No girl with any self-respect, I said to myself, far less with the high spirit of Clara Thorne, can ever regard a man who has put such a slight upon her as this, with eyes of favour; and I am glad to find that I was not mistaken.'

'And this affair will no doubt become a public scandal,' observed Clara, after a moment's pause.

'I think not—I trust not,' replied Lady Trevor earnestly. 'What would happen to my poor husband if he should learn that the finger of scorn was pointing at us I tremble to think;

and such steps have been taken as, I am not without hope, will prevent it. Only one person in the village, save those concerned, is at present aware of what has happened—Mr. Smug—and on his silence I can rely. Do not, therefore, say one word of what I have told you to your people—unless, indeed, you think you owe it to yourself to do so,' she added significantly.

She was anxious to know whether the family at the Rectory were cognizant of the girl's relations with Hugh ; or whether, as she suspected from what she knew of her character, she had kept them to herself.

'I am not accustomed to trouble other people with my affairs, and this is not a case where I am likely to make an exception,' returned Clara bitterly.

'That is well. There is enough, alas ! to account to them for your talk with me in the illness of my poor husband.' She drew the girl's unyielding form to her bosom and kissed her on the cheek.

'You have behaved like an angel, my dear girl,' she said.

Clara's only answer was a crooked smile. To look otherwise than beautiful was impossible to her ; but nobody but a pessimist could have compared the expression of her face to that of an angel.

CHAPTER XL.

A LITTLE WAGER.

Moving from stair to stair, and past every open door with caution, to avoid encountering anyone, Clara Thorne gained the great hall, let herself out with her own hands, and hurried home. Before she reached the Rectory she met Lucy, who, with a face full of anxiety, turned back with her at once.

'Oh, Clara, what sad news !' she cried. 'Have you seen anyone at the Court ?'

'Indeed, I have,' she answered calmly, 'I have been with Lady Trevor herself ; she is in a sad state about Sir Richard, as you may well believe, but I gather that danger is over for the present.'

'Thank Heaven for that ! It was nice of dear Lady Trevor to see you, was it not ? I am almost more sorry for her than for Sir Richard. How broken he must be, poor man, to have been so upset by John Beeton's news !'

'What news ?'

'Why, about his daughter Jenny.'

They had fortunately reached the Rectory gate, which gave Clara an opportunity of steadying herself by it under the pre-

tence of opening it. For the first time in her life she understood what it was to feel faint.

'What about Jenny Beeton?'

'Why, don't you *know?* She has eloped this morning.'

'With whom?' gasped Clara.

'Well, you needn't be so very shocked,' smiled Lucy, 'for it was only with Harry Grange, and we all knew they were to be married some time or another. Why they should have done it we can't conceive, any more than why their doing it should have so affected Sir Richard; I should have thought that he was a man who would have only yawned, and said, "Indeed," if he had been told that half the village had eloped with the other half. Perhaps it was not that which made him ill at all; indeed, if you haven't heard it, it could not have been, for, of course, Lady Trevor will have told you all.'

'She certainly did not tell me that,' said Clara drily.

'Then what was it that did the mischief? Was it mere irritation at John's impudence? I confess to a sneaking liking for John, but papa says he can be very audacious.'

'He was very impertinent, I believe,' answered Clara mechanically, 'and poor Sir Richard lost his temper, which, it seems, is what he had been especially warned against. He had something, it appears, very like a fit.'

'And do you mean to say Lady Trevor never mentioned Jenny?'

'She never uttered one syllable about the elopement at all. Pray tell me about it.'

'Well, I don't know how far the story is true, but that Jenny is gone seems certain; all the village is talking of it. See, yonder comes Mr. Smug, let us ask him; Jenny was one of his lambs, and he will be sure to know all about it.'

'Do you think it will be wise?' murmured Clara hesitatingly. The sight of Mr. Smug agitated her extremely, for she remembered that Lady Trevor had said that he knew all.

'What harm can there possibly be in it?' rejoined Lucy. 'We are not prying into anyone's private affairs;' and she at once stepped forward to meet the preacher.

His face was more grave even than common; but that was easily explained by the misfortune that had happened to his patron. He saluted the young ladies warmly enough, for he was on good terms with both of them, but his greeting of Lucy was far more cordial. This was but natural; for, though unregenerate, she was a labourer in the vineyard like himself, whereas the other took but little interest in the spiritual well-being of her fellow-creatures.

Clara noticed this difference of manner, but mistook its cause; she thought he was expressing sorrow, in his starched

and awkward way, for the infidelity of her lover, whereas Mr. Smug was not even aware of the relations that existed between herself and Hugh Trevor.

Sir Richard's seizure was, of course, the first topic discussed. Lucy showed a much more tender interest in it than she had hitherto exhibited, because she was sure of the other's sympathy. She liked Sir Richard for his own sake, but also because he was so kind a father to Charlie, which could be hardly said as regarded Hugh. When it had been agreed that Sir Richard was getting better, Lucy began to indulge her curiosity.

'There is another item of village news this morning, it seems, which, but for what has happened at the Court, would cause immense excitement. Is it really true, Mr. Smug, that Jenny Beeton has eloped?'

'Certainly not!' answered the minister gravely. 'She is the last girl in the village to do anything of her own free will to outrage public opinion. She has simply gone to town with Mrs. Grange to get her future husband's house in order for him.'

'With Mrs. Grange?' exclaimed Clara. 'Do you mean the housekeeper at the Court?'

'Why, yes, Miss Clara. Jenny's sweetheart is her son, you know. It seems to me a very natural arrangement.'

This was, perhaps, as far as the honest preacher had ever gone on the path of duplicity; and he flattered himself that, by having thus kept Lady Trevor's name out of the matter, no suspicion need attach to her of having had anything to do with it.

Lucy, indeed, was perfectly satisfied.

'I only wish,' she said earnestly, as she shook hands at parting with Mr. Smug, 'that the fright we have all had about poor Sir Richard may turn out to be as groundless as the gossip about Jenny.'

On reaching home Clara went straight up to her own room and locked the door. Her next action was peculiar: she took out her handkerchief and rubbed the cheek Lady Trevor had kissed as though she would have rubbed the skin off.

'So she had sent the girl away herself, and knew that she was safe in London all the while,' she muttered fiercely. 'She is as full of deceit and guile as she is of mystery. Fool that I was to think myself a match for such a woman! Did Hugh really tell her, I wonder, that all would be over between us so far as he was concerned? That seemed to have my lady's touch; but yet she would not have dared to say so had she not obtained his promise to give me up. His promise, indeed, if her tale is true, is not a very valuable bond.'

Here her face darkened, and her finger-nails crooked into her palms.

'To find one's successful rival in a poacher's daughter is a blow to one's self-esteem, indeed. I suppose the mad fool *did* promise her marriage; then men are, after all, but satyrs, and those of us please them most who are least loth. What liars they are, and what cowards! I wonder how my lady got the whip-hand of him. Can it be that he is afraid of her—or, rather, of his father? There's something underhand about those Trevors, I know. What does it matter to me now? "I will never see him, if I can help it," I said, "as long as I live." What a fall was there, and how she must have rejoiced in it! I would marry him to-morrow, if he had not a penny—just to spite her.'

She rose from her chair and paced the room, in a fever of impotent rage and helpless hate.

'It is my own cursed pride,' she went on, 'that has undone me. "Never," I told him, "will I marry you save in Mirbridge Church, and with your mother's consent," and rather than break my word they shall break my heart. She talked of the finger of scorn, but it shall never be levelled at me. "Always know when you're beaten," said Sir Richard the other day (and no doubt the poor man spoke from experience); but at least it is not necessary to let others know it. I would go to my mother's medicine-chest this moment and borrow something that would end all this, but for the fear that it should be said I did it for love of him. I will have no man's pity and far less woman's—I would have no pity upon myself if I could help it.'

Here the scalding tears rushed to her eyes, and she pressed her hands upon them with passionate vehemence, as though she would fain have punished her own weakness. It was the bitterest hour of her life.

Notwithstanding the day was damp and cold, she had thrown her window wide—for sorrow is stifling—and there came up to her the sound of voices soft and low in the veranda beneath. It was Charlie and her sister, talking, no doubt, of his father's illness. What tenderness and sympathy dwelt in those hushed tones! Even should nothing come it in the end, their love had found some fruition in a fool's paradise; it was better than being driven out of a more material Eden by a flaming sword. Was it possible that simple Lucy, whom she had always patronized, and had thought, like some Lady Bountiful, to benefit by the crumbs from her table, had, after all, been wiser than she?

Presently there were other sounds—the noise of wheels and hoofs upon the gravel-sweep; from her window she could see the coachman and the horses, but they were strange to her. Visitors at the Rectory were rare, and though her curiosity could hardly be said to be awakened, the incident roused her from her sad thoughts. The inmates of the carriage had alighted,

for she heard their voices in the hall, and in one of them she recognised the sharp, decisive tones of Mrs. Westrop. Her drooping spirit was roused at once, like that of some sick war-horse at the blaze of the trumpet. If that woman should know that she was within doors and not see her, it might set her tongue going. She herself was in no humour for talk, but it was absolutely necessary that no one should perceive in her a shadow of humiliation or disappointment. With a few skilful touches she restored what was amiss in the armour of her charms, and with her usual air of quiet dignity made her appearance in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Westrop and Miss Mumchance were the callers, and with her parents were discussing the sad news at the Court. How sick and tired she was of it, and how hateful it had become to her! Nevertheless, as the only person present who had seen Lady Trevor, she was, of course, beset with inquiries.

She answered them briefly enough.

'But you should go to head-quarters for information,' she added. 'Mr. Charles is here, I think?'

'Indeed?' said Mrs. Westrop, with a sharp glance at her hostess.

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Thorne, with a faint blush; 'he very kindly came over from the Court to tell us what had happened. He is in the garden with Mr. Gurdon and Lucy.'

'Two's company and three's none,' observed Mrs. Westrop. 'It would be a charity to go out to them, Mary Anne. You told me, I remember, you had something particular to say to Lucy.'

'If Mrs. Thorne will permit me,' answered the heiress, smiling to the rest at her companion's masterful ways.

'By all means,' replied her hostess. 'Open the window, Percy, and let Miss Mumchance out.'

When this was done,

'Now that strangers have withdrawn,' observed Mrs. Westrop, 'let me know how the case really stands with our old friend at the Court. Is he going to leave us or not?'

'My dear madam!' remonstrated the Rector.

'Yes, yes. I know what *you* are going to say,' she interrupted sharply. 'D.V. and all that; but the question is, What does the doctor say?'

'None of us have yet seen the doctor,' said Mrs. Thorne stiffly. She had the patience of an angel, but she could not stand seeing her husband snubbed by any woman, though, as she did not take the privilege of a wife in that respect herself, her conduct might have been compared with that of the dog in the manger.

As Clara did not give herself the trouble to impart the information which she alone possessed, there was a pause that might

have been embarrassing to the questioner had she not been Mrs. Westrop.

'Let me see, how old is he?' continued that lady. 'Forty-five or forty-six?'

'Clara knows,' said Mrs. Thorne, turning to her daughter. 'Don't you remember, my dear, you told us you came upon it the other day, when you were searching the register for your father?'

'He was forty-six on the 5th of April last,' said Clara mechanically.

'What a memory!' observed Mrs. Westrop sarcastically.

'Yes; there is no possession for which we old people envy the young ones more than that,' said Mrs. Thorne. Even a female saint may be found to have a kick in her, when her daughter's gifts are spoken of contemptuously. But into Clara's breast the dart had gone far deeper. What Mrs. Westrop had meant, as she well understood, was that she would not have remembered the date had not the circumstance had a personal interest for her; in other words, that she was speculating upon Sir Richard's death. It was not true, of course, but there had been a time when the possibilities of such an event had certainly crossed her mind.

'Now I suppose Lady Trevor must be at least three years his junior?' continued Mrs. Westrop meditatively.

'Her birth was not in the register,' said Clara drily.

'Well, I dare say not, Miss Clara,' said the old lady with a good-humoured laugh. She dropped her firebrands about from mere recklessness, and without any deliberate attempt at arson, and when, as in the present case, she saw that she had done a little mischief she was satisfied. Her object in getting rid of Miss Mumchance had not been to talk about Sir Richard, but to give that young lady an opportunity of conversing with Charlie Trevor, whose future Mrs. Westrop had made up her mind vicariously to provide for.

'I should think Lady Trevor was not more than forty,' observed the Rector.

'That's because you're a man,' said Mrs. Westrop. 'We know better, don't we, Mrs. Thorne?'

Mrs. Thorne smiled uncomfortably; if there was a fellow-creature in the world whom she could be said to positively dislike, it was this audacious widow.

'It is a matter, my dear Rector, considering your connection with "Hatch" and "Match,"' went on Mrs. Westrop in her liveliest manner, 'with which you really ought to be better acquainted. Mr. Hugh, making allowance for the life one hears he has led, and which always tells even on a young man, must be twenty-four at least, and yet he can't be that either. Let me

see, Sir Richard's escapade—which was a more serious matter than people think—took place a quarter of a century ago. His affections—even if they were tinder—can hardly have been engaged so immediately elsewhere as to have allowed him to marry in less, say, than six months. Indeed, that was about the time we heard he did marry. In that case Hugh would be twenty-three, and if your view of Lady Trevor's age be correct, she would have been a bride at sixteen, which is young, even for France.'

'I only judged by her looks,' murmured the Rector apologetically. The facts, he saw, were against him.

'Of course not. How else does a man ever judge a woman?' observed the widow scornfully. 'Nevertheless, it can't be denied that she keeps her youth, and that without the help of either paint or powder. If I've any luck I'll find out how old she *is*, before either of us are twenty-four hours older."

'Are you going to ask her her age?' inquired Clara demurely.

'Never you mind what I am going to do; but I'll bet you a pair of gloves, Miss Clara, that before the afternoon is over that mystery will be solved.'

'I'll take that bet,' said Clara; 'my number is six and a quarter.'

'And mine is six, and you'll want to know it,' replied Mrs. Westrop.

The Rector looked a little grave.

'We do not quite approve of young ladies making bets,' observed Mrs. Thorne for self and partner.

'It will not be the cause of my taking professionally to the Turf, mother, I assure you,' replied Clara composedly.

'Moreover, it is not a serious affair, but only with the gloves,' added Mrs. Westrop, smiling complacently at her little witticism.

It seemed, indeed, but a small thing; but, as often happens, it was destined to be the pivot on which a very great thing turned.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE INVITATION.

THOUGH Mrs. Westrop's reference to the uncompanionable character of a trio (save for the singing of glees) is true enough in the general, it had but little application to the particular persons she had in her mind, for so very much was Mr. Gurdon at home with Charles and Lucy, that he was hardly any impediment to their tender goings-on at all. They liked him immensely, and, though so keen of eye and ear, he had a sort of 'Don't mind me' way with him that made him quite the perfection of a 'gooseberry-picker.' For my part, I don't know a

pleasanter trait in man or woman than the inspiration of this sort of confidence, though at the same time it was funny enough to see a young fellow only the senior of these young people by a month or two thus invested with the attributes of a Grandfather Whitehead. It was a case of 'She saw I saw Esau,' but without either Esau or herself being in the least disturbed by the circumstance.

The two were walking a little ahead of their trusted friend, under the shelter of the low boxwood hedge, in which he appeared to take some botanic interest, when he suddenly called out to them (much as 'Cave' is called by schoolboys), 'There is somebody coming down from the house.' Whereupon Charles straightened his arm, which had a crook in it, in which somehow his companion was involved, and began pointing out to her the beauties of Bridge Hill as though it were a novel object.

Lucy's heart 'went pit-a-pat,' and when she saw that it was Miss Mumchance who was the intruder upon her dreamland, it went faster still. She knew that it was 'little' of her, as well as disloyal, to harbour any such suspicion, yet she could not help fearing for a moment that the heiress had come over to Mirbridge to make prey of her Charlie. She thought him such a tempting morsel that nobody could resist him, and quite forgot that she had invited the new-comer with her own lips, the other night at Catesby Hall.

'This is not the call I threatened you with,' said Miss Mumchance, shaking hands with her very warmly, 'or I would not have chosen so early an hour. We came over to inquire after your poor father, Mr. Charles, and are glad to hear somewhat better news than we had been led to expect.'

'He is getting on, my mother tells me, as well as can be hoped for, though I have not seen him,' answered Charlie. 'He is to be kept perfectly quiet, without excitement of any kind.'

'I can easily understand that, and that Lady Trevor also does not wish to be intruded upon at such a time. That is why we came here for our news, instead of to the Court.'

'Oh, but I hope you will come on to us,' said Charlie earnestly, 'for it would, I am sure, be a relief to my mother to see you. Indeed, I heard her laying special injunctions on the servants that if you were good enough to make "kind inquiries," as the phrase goes, you should not be allowed to go away without seeing her.'

'That was very kind and friendly of her,' said Miss Mumchance, 'and under those circumstance I will certainly call. Perhaps you will come with me,' she added, turning to Lucy. 'The fact is, I am a little frightened of Lady Trevor,' she whispered, 'and your presence would make it easy for me. There's plenty of room in the carriage.'

'I'll come, of course ; but I think I should prefer to walk,' said Lucy, with an involuntary glance at Charlie that caused the heiress and Mr. Gurdon to exchange significant smiles.

Of course Lucy preferred to be with her lover, but she also shrank from the companionship of Mrs. Westrop, of whom she stood in quite as great alarm as did Miss Mumchance of Lady Trevor, though she had no suspicion of her scheme to make Charlie happy at her expense.

'Then we'll all walk,' said Mr. Gurdon. 'Two and two, you know, like good little boys and girls,' he added assuringly in response to the momentary shadow of disappointment that crossed Lucy's face.

'Only not the little girls together, and the little boys together, as is done at school,' added Miss Mumchance with wicked celerity.

'But then there's Mrs. Westrop,' objected Charlie naïvely.

'Oh, I'll manage her,' said the heiress, 'if Mr. Charles will give me his hand for a moment up this slippery hill. It's only a loan, my dear,' she whispered to Lucy, as Charles helped her up the steep ascent that led to the veranda. They had scarcely reached it before Mrs. Westrop presented herself at the drawing-room window clothed with smiles.

'How are you, Mr. Charles? Don't trouble yourself to come in to pay me your respects, I beg. You two make such a pretty picture, framed and glazed, that I don't want to see you any nearer.'

She was delighted to see him thus companioned, and when she heard that the young people proposed to walk to the Court, if she didn't mind driving thither by herself, fell into the proposal at once.

Mrs. Thorne looked towards Clara, hoping, rather than expecting, that she would offer to accompany her guest ; but that young lady made no sign. She might naturally have excused herself on the ground that she had been to the Court already that morning, but she was not—indeed, she very rarely was—in an apologetic mood. She disliked the free-spoken widow very cordially, but if she had been her dearest friend, and her life had depended on it, she could hardly have been persuaded to have accompanied her. The Court and all belonging to it were, for the present, hateful to her ; and the idea of meeting its mistress, as she must needs do if she would keep the knowledge of her defeat and humiliation to herself, was abhorrent to her mind. So the walking party started on their way in the order most agreeable to two of them, and by no means unpleasing to the other two ; for their sympathy with the young couple was a bond of union between Mr. Gurdon and Miss Mumchance of a very genuine kind ; each respected the other for the possession of it,

and Mr. Gurdon sang Charlie's praises, and Miss Mumchance Lucy's, with a most harmonious effect.

'It is plain that if that happy pair yonder'—for with great consideration they had allowed a space to intervene between them and the others—'could make a match of it, they would have *our* good wishes,' said Miss Mumchance rather superfluously, but somehow the topic was attractive to her.

'That is all, unfortunately, I have to give them,' said Mr. Gurdon grimly, 'and I don't think they have anything of their own. In such cases the making one and one make one is almost as difficult a feat as it would be in arithmetic.'

'And even if you had anything to give them, I suppose that amazing pride which belongs to you men would prevent Mr. Charles accepting it.'

His companion's tone was so serious that Mr. Gurdon looked up at her inquiringly.

'Well, you know, a fellow doesn't like being beholden to another fellow—that is, to anybody but his own belongings—for his bread and cheese.'

'Oh, yes, he will take bread and cheese, and turtle and venison, and lodgings of a very superior kind, but he will not share the purchase-money of these things even with a friend who has more than he can spend. That is one of the things that make money so hateful to me,' said Miss Mumchance bitterly.

'Still, I have no doubt, you make your money less hateful to other people,' said Mr. Gurdon, smiling at his companion's indignation.

'I can give to the poor, of course, without inflicting any painful sense of obligation; but if I wish to benefit my friend, I find my hands tied by the merest red tape of obstruction. I am like a golden image, not particularly ornamental, but which it is forbidden to melt, and thereby to make useful.'

'Still, you do melt, and it seems to me rather easily,' said Mr. Gurdon, with a glance at the young couple before them.

'It is easy enough to pity people. We know what the Scripture says of those who say, "Be ye warmed and filled," but give no bread-and-coal tickets. I wonder whether Mr. Charles would care to take an agency in Ireland? I have an estate with a good house upon it, that wants looking after by an honest, kindly gentleman, rather than by an expert; as he will be probably shot at, the offer of such a post can scarcely involve much obligation.'

'I only wish *I* had such a chance to give him,' said Mr. Gurdon earnestly; '*my* estate—with its château—is unhappily in Spain, a still more unsettled country. Seriously, I believe our friend Charles would jump at it. Have I really your permission to sound him on the subject?'

'Well, of course; you surely don't think me capable of a joke, and still less of an effort of the imagination?'

'I think you—but I will not say what I think, Miss Mumchance,' he answered warmly, 'lest in your modesty you should fancy I was paying you compliments.'

'For Heaven's sake don't do that, Mr. Gurdon,' was the grave reply; and the pair walked on in silence till they reached the Court.

Here Mrs. Westrop came up with them in the carriage, and Hugh, as it happened, met the whole party as they entered the hall, and ushered the visitors with unwonted affability into the drawing-room. His face was serious, as suited with the occasion, but not, as usual, saturnine; as Mrs. Westrop afterwards observed, 'grief seemed to agree with him,' for never before had he shown himself so polite to her. When his mother joined them, as she almost immediately did, he transferred his attentions to Miss Mumchance, in a manner that would, perhaps, have been more gracious, and certainly more acceptable to her, if it had been less marked. Mrs. Westrop watched him with 'the tail of her eye' as she talked to Lady Trevor of her invalid, and said to herself, 'The wind has changed to *that* quarter, has it, Master Hugh, but you shall not cut out your younger brother, if I can help it.' Never were good-natured endeavour and astuteness more ludicrously thrown away than in that good lady's case; in one of her objects, though a secondary one, she had, however, a complete success.

'You have got that lovely locket on, I see, Lady Trevor, which aroused my covetousness on the first day I ever saw you. May I look at it a little nearer?'

The hostess smiled, and, disengaging the ornament from its little chain, at once placed it in the widow's hand, who took it to the window, as if to admire its workmanship, while Lady Trevor turned her attention to the other visitors.

After a few words about the park and the garden, of which the heiress, as well she might, was expressing her admiration:

'I do hope, Miss Mumchance,' she said, 'that when my dear husband gets a little better, Mrs. Westrop will spare you to me a few days here, though it is not the time of the year to see our local beauties at their best. It would be quite a charity to me, I do assure you.'

While Miss Mumchance hesitated, the quick-eared widow answered for her.

'Mary Anne shall come, Lady Trevor; you may rely upon that, as far as I am concerned. If she imagines that I can't spare her, she was never more mistaken in her life; though you will find yourself mistaken, too, my lady,' added the speaker to herself, 'if you think that she is coming to be Mrs. Hugh Trevor.'

For poor Miss Mumchance there was nothing for it, of course, but to accept her hostess's invitation, which, indeed, she showed no unwillingness to do; and as she glanced towards Mr. Gurdon as she did so, it is probable that she saw in it an opportunity of detailing to him her little scheme for making two lovers happy.

'Beautiful, beautiful indeed!' observed Mrs. Westrop as she returned the locket. 'We have certainly few jewellers in this country who can rival the French. It was given you on your birthday, you told me, I think, by dear Sir Richard?'

'Yes,' sighed Lady Trevor; 'at a time when I little looked forward to seeing him as I saw him to-day.'

The tears stole down her cheeks as she made that comparison between past and present which wrings so many a heart.

Lucy felt for her as she had never felt before, though she had always pitied her; but she had another cause for sorrow, which distressed her even more. In spite of an invitation from her hostess to stay for luncheon, backed by Charlie's appealing eyes, she presently withdrew with the two visitors, who dropped her at the Rectory gate, on their way home.

'I am sorry to make you the bearer of bad news, my dear,' were Mrs. Westrop's farewell words, as she put a pencilled note into her hands; 'but I must ask you to give this to your sister! It refers to a little wager we had together, and which Miss Clara has lost.'

In her agitation and distress of mind, Lucy paid scarcely any heed to the injunction. She had much worse news than that—or at all events what her sister would consider such—to give to Clara.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE REGISTER.

It was a relief to Lucy to find her people had already sat down to luncheon, so that for the present there was no opportunity of speaking with her sister alone. Whether, indeed, she would speak to her at all on the matter she had on her mind she had some doubts; to meddle with Clara's affairs was always dangerous, and pretty sure to be resented; how much more then was she likely to take amiss what, as in this case, must needs be a blow to her self-esteem. Ninety-nine girls out of a hundred in Lucy's place would probably have suffered their sister to find out what had occurred for herself; but disdainful of sympathy as Clara had always shown herself to be, Lucy was resolved to break for her—so far as love could do it—the force of what she could not but believe would be a most cruel and unexpected blow. The thought of the ordeal before her, however, took away from her

all appetite, and caused her to answer half mechanically the various questions her mother put to her about the reception of the visitors at the Court. One thing, indeed, she designedly told them, in order to some extent to prepare her sister for what was to follow, namely, that Lady Trevor had invited Miss Mumchance to pay her a visit. Though her mother observed 'Indeed,' with a significance that would have aroused anyone's suspicions that was not a man, not only did the Rector receive the announcement as the most natural thing in the world, but it seemed to make no deeper impression on Clara herself.

'I think I *will* take another slice of ham, papa,' was the remark she made at that juncture, and even condescended to a playful joust with him upon the right of the fair sex to change their minds. Like most masterful people, Clara had a wholesome appetite, and it was quite terrible to Lucy to see her dispose of her two or three dainty dishes with all her usual enjoyment, and then proceed to peel a pear. Under that mask of silence and composure, however, as Lucy well knew, there might be much at work, and once or twice she fancied that Clara stole a glance at her, pregnant with keen inquiry.

The Rector had matters to attend to in the village, and was the first to leave the table, and then Mrs. Thorne was summoned to an interview with the gardener; as the indoor servants took their dinner at that hour, the young ladies were thus left alone without any danger of interruption. Lucy trembled from head to foot with the burthen of what she felt herself called upon to communicate, and could not find the fitting word with which to begin it. An opportunity was, indeed, presently afforded her, but in an incident which, notwithstanding its appropriateness to the occasion, only increased her embarrassment. After she had done with her pear, Clara took the peel and threw it over her shoulder (a thing they had often done as children) to see what sort of an initial it made on the floor.

'It is not much like an H, is it?' she observed coolly, while Lucy stared at the shapeless coil in horror. 'Come, my dear,' added Clara, laying a slender finger with unwonted tenderness on the other's cheek, 'tell me the news with which I perceive your kind little heart is labouring.'

But Lucy's tongue clave to her mouth.

'It is so bad as that, is it?' continued the other. 'I suppose I shall have to find it out by the Socratic method, as papa calls it. You know how clever I used to be at "Twenty Questions."'

This second allusion to their old childish games together, in the days in which, if there were disappointments, there were at least no catastrophes, completed poor Lucy's discomfiture, and she burst into a torrent of tears.

'Why, one would really think this goddaughter of the Fairy

Baccarat was coming after your own Charlie,' remonstrated Clara.

'I shouldn't mind that half so much, because I should know she had no chance,' sobbed Lucy.

'Just so; whereas with Hugh you feel she will succeed,' said Clara slowly. 'You have the same high opinion of my lady's power of intrigue, then, that I have always entertained myself. Still, all is not lost that's in danger.'

Lucy shook her head. She could not encourage what she knew to be false hopes, yet she had not the heart to speak the word that must needs demolish them.

'You think that all *is* lost, do you? I should be the better judge of that if I possessed the data from which you have formed your views. Just tell me what her ladyship said.

'It was not so much her words as her manner, Clara dear; her welcome to Miss Mumchance was so significantly warm, and her invitation to her couched in such very friendly terms. She said it would be a real charity in her to come and stay at the Court, and when Miss Mumchance was about to make some excuse, I think, that dreadful Mrs. Westrop accepted for her.'

'Those two women are at cross purposes, nevertheless, my dear,' said Clara thoughtfully; 'moreover, there is nothing so very alarming in this new-born desire of her ladyship to have a female companion. I am afraid that neither of us have so played our cards as to be eligible for such a post. I suppose she kept her darling Hugh in the background, not, of course, because she doubted of his making a favourable impression on any woman, but as a *bonne bouche*. Did he put in an appearance at all?'

'It was Hugh himself who received us; and, Clara dear, his attentions to Miss Mumchance were, I am sorry to say, even more marked than those of his mother; they were, in short, unmistakable.'

'Indeed!'

The word, usually so significant of indifference, was uttered in a tone not only hard and dry, but even fierce. The bosom of the speaker rose and fell with stifled passion. There was a glare in her gray eyes such as is seen in a burning house a moment before the roof falls in and the flame leaps up at the sky.

'Perhaps it was "only manner," as dear mamma calls it,' she continued with a forced smile and a catch in her breath. 'Did he say anything to her particularly?'

'I heard him murmur, when his mother asked her to come to Mirbridge for her sake, "and for mine too," though I don't think Miss Mumchance heard him.'

'He dared to say that, did he?' Clara flashed out; then, mastering herself with a great effort, she added bitterly: 'How

like him! How well I recognise his style of wooing. Did the others notice what was going on?'

'Not as I did, of course, though it could hardly have escaped their notice. Mr. Gurdon looked pained, I thought.'

'Yes, I suppose there are *some* honourable men in the world; they are not *all* cowards and liars.'

'Indeed they are not,' said Lucy, with a little flush.

Clara took no notice of this rejoinder; she seemed to be ashamed of her late outbreak, or, more probably, of the weakness that had permitted it. A look of icy calm, very different from resignation, but as quiet as though her noble features had been carved in stone, had succeeded her momentary fury. Condolence, Lucy knew, was out of the question, but the moment seemed opportune for a few words in mitigation of the calamity.

'Of course, darling, Hugh has behaved infamously, but does it not prove how totally unworthy he was of you? Is it not better that he should have shown himself in his true colours now than after it was too late? You know how I have always tried to make Charlie think less hardly of him, but in vain. Is Charlie one to think so ill of his only brother without just cause? Nobody, indeed, but his mother has ever had a good opinion of him except yourself.'

'Who said I had a good opinion of him?' answered Clara quickly. 'I never attempted to deceive even myself about him, much less other people. I know his faults far better than you do; and I would have taken him with all his faults. I know, too, whom I have to thank for what has been done to-day. Let us say no more about it.'

Lucy was far from wishing to prolong such talk, and, in fact, was shaking in her shoes. It seemed wonderful to her that she had ventured to say what she had said.

'Here is a little note which Mrs. Westrop told me to give you, Clara,' she murmured timidly.

Clara took the slip of paper, and glanced at it indifferently. Then suddenly her countenance lighted up.

'Do you know what is written here?' she inquired excitedly.

'No, dear. Mrs. Westrop only said you had lost some little wager.'

Clara Thorne did not look like a loser. She stood with one hand clenched on the table, and her face turned to the window; the autumn sun was shining full upon it, and such an expression Lucy had never seen her sister wear before. It was stern, and fierce, and triumphant. As she gazed, majestic and apart, up at the blood-red orb, certain lines descriptive of a noble bird of prey in act to swoop involuntarily occurred to Lucy's mind:

> 'He clasps the crag with hookèd hands,
> Close to the sun in lonely lands.
>
> . . . . . .

He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.'

On whom, she wondered, was Clara about to fall? What could Mrs. Westrop have possibly written to have moved her sister thus? As she showed no disposition to speak, Lucy grew positively alarmed.

'My dearest Clara, what *are* you thinking of?' she inquired.

'How the whirligig of Time brings about our revenges,' was the enigmatic rejoinder. 'It is a matter that may be for your benefit as well as mine, and therefore I have some claim to ask a favour. Will you promise me, Lucy, that you will never tell any human being what has just passed between us two?'

'But nothing *has* passed. You have told me nothing.'

'So much the better for us both. Never speak of what you have heard or seen, or even thought, since we two have been here alone together. When the time comes, as I now think it will, when Charlie and you will have everything in common, remember that *this*, at least, is not to be shared with him. Do you hear me?' she added impatiently.

'Yes, Clara.'

'Then for your own sake, and for his, I charge you, *Heed*.'

As she spoke the word with earnest gravity she swept out of the room, and closed the door behind her.

Lucy stood 'with parted lips and straining eyes,' like one awakening from some eery dream. Her sister had always been a problem to her, but had never shown herself so strange. She heard her go upstairs to her room, and then descend and leave the house. What *could* have happened thus, in a moment, to have changed her despondency to triumph? What could have been in that note from Mrs. Westrop into which she was never to inquire, and concerning even the reception of which she had been enjoined so solemnly to keep silence? Above all, what could have made Clara speak so hopefully of her union with Charlie, about which she had not only never before been sanguine, but had given her no sort of encouragement?

In the meantime Clara was walking with unusual speed towards the village. A hasty step, literally or otherwise, she never took. Even her quickest movements had a certain queenly grace; but there was a flush on her cheek and a fire in her eye, that afternoon, which spoke of unwonted excitement. At the entrance of the village was a footpath that led to the churchyard, and into this she turned. At the gate was the sexton's cottage, and here she called for the keys of the church. If it had been Lucy, the old fellow would have had a clack with her, and inquired what she wanted with them; but with Clara no such familiarity was ever attempted by the most confirmed of village gossips. It was not long ago that she had come, at

her father's request, to examine the parish registers in reply to some correspondent; and no doubt, thought the sexton to himself, she had now come on a similar errand.

'Passon's a-getting his fees in,' was his inward reflection as he placed the great key in her hand, with which was a smaller one that opened the vestry door.

Without one glance at the humble memorials of the departed to right or left of her path, nor even at the fine old church itself, yellow with lichen where it was not green with ivy, and hallowed with the prayers of a score of generations, Clara moved swiftly on. Her thoughts, though 'of the earth earthy,' were not concerned with the dead, and still less with the Heaven which, let us hope, had received them. But in the porch she paused a moment ere she put the key in the door, and placed her hand upon her bosom—not that she needed breath, for her splendid vital powers would have known no loss of it had she walked twice as fast and far—but to still the emotions that were agitating it.

'It must be as I suspect,' she murmured, like one who would reassure herself before convincement; 'my memory in such a matter could never have played me false. If it be so, my lady, you shall repent to your dying day having put your foot upon my neck this morning. "To-day for me, to-morrow for thee," says old Sir Marmaduke's gravestone, a motto that holds no less good for the dead than for the living.'

Then she opened the great door, locked it carefully behind her, and entered the vestry, where she took the same precaution; she even pulled down the blind over its little window, which was on a level with the ground, and therefore liable to possible scrutiny. On a shelf stood the registers, in volumes, with their proper dates, and selecting one of them without hesitation, she placed it on the little table, at which so many hands, trembling with love and joy, had witnessed to their marriage morn. Her own hand trembled with excitement as she rapidly turned over the leaves; she stopped at a certain baptismal record of three-and-forty years ago; an entry which, according to old fashion, also indicated the day of birth—'When and where born. Twenty-sixth of July, Mirbridge. Name, Letitia Beeton.'

Her eyes drank in the words as thirsty lips some longed-for and delicious draught. With the first two columns only, as it seemed, she had to do, for she read no further, but perused them again and again, as if to make certainty doubly sure. Then she took from her pocket Mrs. Westrop's pencilled scrawl, and flattened it out upon the book, as though to compare line with line.

'You have lost your gloves,' it ran; 'I found Lady Trevor's age recorded in a locket given to her by Sir Richard on her birthday. She was forty-three on the 26th of last July.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

CLARA SPEAKS OUT.

WHETHER dark hair has ever turned to white in a single night from passing it with a ghost, or other exciting or depressing cause, is a moot point; but that much more complete changes have taken place in the heart of man is certain. The Salvationist will tell you that conversion has happened to him in a flash between one drum-beat and another; the lover that a single monosyllable has made the whole world rose-colour for him; and the debtor, who hears tidings of an unexpected fortune, that he feels 'another man.'

No more complete transformation ever happened to any one of these than had occurred to Clara Thorne in the single hour that had intervened between her reception of Mrs. Westrop's note and her comparison of its contents with that entry in the parish register. Humiliation was exchanged for triumph; disappointment for success; and assured prosperity for what, in truth, had seemed to her very ruin. Her look, indeed, as she stepped out of the church porch was none the prouder, because it was always proud, and had never been more so than on that terrible morning when she had been dismissed from Mirbridge Court with a pity more insulting than contempt by the woman whose fate she now held in her hand. But the courage that had sustained her to the eye of others had, as she herself well knew, been the courage of despair. Her sister—simple girl!—had spoken to her of the advantage of having been warned in time.' But what is time worth if it is not coupled with opportunity? And what opportunity, having lost the chance for which she had been scheming (in her proud, high-handed way) to 'place' herself for many a weary month, was likely to occur to her again? The very depth of the discouragement into which she had been plunged made the compensating wave which was now bearing her on to fortune seem the higher. She had no doubt that to fortune it was tending. If, with her slender means, and under such adverse circumstances, she had contrived *almost* to win the prize that had been so unexpectedly denied her, was it likely, with the lever she had now to work with against the chief obstacle to her designs, that she should fail in them? It was not likely—nay, she felt, knowing her own powers, that it was not probable; while the having so nearly missed her object made her tenfold more resolute to obtain it. For the moment, when Lady Trevor had convinced her of Hugh's infidelity, she had been ready to cast him off for ever, as if she had loved him more she would most certainly have done; but, though she had suffered his mother to take it for granted that all must be over

between them, she would have by no means subscribed to that arrangement but for the thought of her successful rival being located in the village. That, indeed, was a circumstance which would have been utterly intolerable to her, as Lady Trevor had foreseen, and had laid her plans accordingly. If she had said, 'I have sent the girl away to be married to her betrothed,' she would never have obtained from Clara what had been a virtual abandonment of her claim on Hugh ; and the knowledge that she had been overreached in this matter made her very bitter against her enemy.

Instead of looking upon Lady Trevor as a Machiavelli, she only saw in her a Sapphira. That lady's whole life, indeed, at Mirbridge seemed to her a long chain of lies, instead of the natural and necessary consequence of her false position. Of her identity with Letty Beeton she had not the shadow of a doubt, and even despised her own intelligence for not having discovered it for herself without the key. The birthday of the two women being on the same date could hardly be a mere coincidence ; it was itself almost a proof positive of Lady Trevor's being one with Letty Beeton ; but a score of circumstances now recurred to her recollection, the cumulative force of which ought, she felt, to have long ago aroused her suspicions. Her ladyship's ill-concealed knowledge of local matters, her intermittent use of a French accent, her reserve with those who had known her in former position, contrasted with her frankness to others ; above all, the disinclination her haughty spirit had shown to quarrel with those of whom—being what she was—she would naturally stand in fear, such as Mr. Morris. When everyone knew that the land-agent was dishonest, was it likely that so sharp-witted a woman should be deceived in him ? There was something that had held the hand which would have otherwise been swift enough to mete out his punishment. Mr. Gurdon, indeed, had almost said as much when he had admitted that Lady Trevor had bade him be silent about that copy of the Romney. Did Mr. Morris *know ?*

She was standing in the church porch, carefully considering the whole situation, when this question occurred to her, and its effect was overwhelming ; her limbs trembled beneath her as it came into her thoughts, and she dropped upon the stone seat that ran along the side of it like one exhausted by physical fatigue.

'Did Mr. Morris know ? Did Mr. Gurdon know ? Did *anybody* know ? besides herself,' she wondered with sinking heart ; for if there was anyone else in possession of Lady Trevor's secret, it would lose half, nay, perhaps, all its value to her. She might ruin her, of course, by revealing what she knew, but revenge was after all a very secondary object with her. What

she wanted was to marry Hugh Trevor with the consent and apparent approbation of his mother. Other joys were but toys in comparison with the accomplishment of that long-looked-for end. And why should Lady Trevor grant so much to one who could, after all, only harm her as others could, not secure her from harm?

Upon the whole, however, though her late triumphant mood was greatly abated, Clara came to the conclusion that she was, at present—at all events—the sole depository of Lady Trevor's secret; had it been otherwise, some bribe must surely have been given elsewhere, too large to have escaped public attention. At the same time, the possibility of the contrary sobered her views and rendered her more cautious and capable for the interview that lay before her; for to see Lady Trevor at once she had quite made up her mind. The time was short for any action, since she knew not what might be the next move of her astute adversary; her very proposal to Miss Mumchance to become her guest might be only a blind—and indeed there was something not a little suspicious in the openness of the invitation—and the will that had exiled Jenny Beeton from Mirbridge at so short a notice might banish Hugh himself from the same dangerous neighbourhood. Perhaps, too, strong and confident as Clara felt herself to be, she was unequal to the strain of having a matter so weighty, and fraught with such important consequences to her future, upon her mind. The spirit that shrinks not from the battle often bears with difficulty the suspense that precedes it.

Without returning home, she therefore turned her steps to the Court. As she entered the avenue she perceived Hugh himself coming down it, and would have given much, if unobserved, she could have retraced her steps. Whatever might pass between them she resolved should make no difference as regarded the end she had in view; but it was a moment of intense embarrassment. She was far from having forgiven him for his impudent and faithless behaviour; and if, as was probable, he knew that she was aware of it, he might attempt some sort of apology which would try her self-control to the uttermost. His nature was not only averse to any confession of wrongdoing; but when its obstinacy was overcome a certain surly awkwardness took the place of resentment, and made the exercise of any diplomacy on the part of the aggrieved party very difficult. That Hugh had caught sight of her was certain, though he was coming on with gaze studiously fixed upon the ground, as though he had not done so; they were not thirty paces apart when he suddenly struck off into a path that led to the walled garden, the door of which he opened with a savage jerk, and then slammed behind him. A more complete example of 'the cut direct' it was impossible to imagine.

Clara stopped for a moment mechanically; that slam of the door, though it had extricated her from a most disagreeable dilemma, gave her a certain shock—for she had never been cut, at all events by a male, in all her life. The snubbing had been hitherto entirely the other way. On reflection, however, that *amour propre* of which she had always so large a stock in hand asserted itself; and from what some members of her sex would have deemed an insult she even derived a positive satisfaction. It became plain to her that Hugh was ashamed of himself, and, what was still more satisfactory, afraid to meet her. In the taming of wild animals, whatever their masters may tell us to the contrary, it is fear that accomplishes their subjugation; love of a certain sort may mingle with it, but love alone can never teach them to close the lip and sheathe the claw. Clara's diagnosis of Hugh's nature was a correct one up to a certain point. But in her egotism and sense of power she imagined that she should have the same influence over him when she had become his wife that she exercised when he had yet to win her—a mistake which many a woman finds out to her cost. Moreover, notwithstanding what had recently occurred, she overrated the strength of his affection, and, even for his shameful avoidance of her, was inclined to blame his mother more than himself. What influence had been brought to bear upon him she could not guess, but she flattered herself that it must have been a very powerful one which, notwithstanding all that had come and gone, had prevented his throwing himself at her feet and asking pardon. This reflection helped to strengthen her for the errand on which she was bound, by giving her new cause for indignation.

Astonishment was an emotion that Mr. Cadman seldom permitted himself to exhibit, but a wild surprise overspread his ecclesiastical features when admitting Miss Thorne for the second time, and positively led him into an indiscretion.

'Mr. Hugh has just gone out, miss. I wonder you did not meet him in the avenue.'

'I do not wish to see Mr. Hugh. I wish to see Lady Trevor alone—tell her, upon very particular business. Be so good as to do so at once.'

There was more than reproof in her tone, though she uttered none; there was castigation. In the case of almost anyone else, the trusty retainer would have opposed to such a demand a stolid but bland resistance; but Mr. Cadman was far-seeing, and he felt that there was a possible chance, and at a date perhaps not remote, of the young lady obtaining a legitimate authority over him.

'Certainly, miss;' he piqued himself on never saying 'ma'am' except to married ladies, and was of opinion that the older they

were the more they liked it, and immediately summoned the lady's-maid, who presently ushered Clara to the boudoir.

'Her ladyship is with Sir Richard, but will join you in a few moments,' she said, very respectfully; for, as became her sex, she had even a keener eye than the butler for Miss Clara's possibilities.

Finding the scene at her disposal, that young lady, with quiet celerity, made a slight alteration in the arrangement of the furniture: she made all the chairs, save one, front the window, and took the only seat that had its back to the light. 'My lady's tongue will tell me nothing she can help,' was her muttered reflection; 'but, as everyone is so fond of saying, her beauty lies in expression, the disadvantage of which is that it is not always under one's own control.' Clara, who was beautiful in all moods, 'wet or dry,' as Hugh used to say, had doubtless had the attribute in question of the elder lady 'thrown at her' more than once in depreciation of her own charms, and even in that supreme moment she did not forget it.

When Lady Trevor made her appearance, it was with a countenance grave and sad, befitting one who has come from the bedside of a sick husband, but without the least sign of annoyance at what must have certainly seemed to her an inopportune summons. But the instant she glanced at her visitor's face her lips tightened, as one who buckles on his armour for the fray, and her tone had a distance in it she had never used before, as she inquired the other's business.

'To what am I indebted, Miss Clara, for the honour of this second visit?'

'It arises from the first, Lady Trevor,' was the icy reply, in which, as it has since occurred to me, we did not quite understand one another. I mean as to the relations which you chose to assume were in future to exist between your son and me.'

'Indeed! Perhaps it would have been better, then, if you had taken advantage of my suggestion that you should see my son, and hear from himself his views upon the subject.'

'I *have* seen him, madam.'

'What! and do you mean to tell me that he has dared—I mean that he has had the audacity to pretend that you have still any hold on his affections?'

'I said that I had seen him; I did not say that I had spoken with him. That, as you were about indiscreetly to observe, he doubtless *dared* not do.'

'And is it possible that you—that any girl in your position, with a spark of self-respect—could have desired him to do so? Why, you told me yourself that you never wished to see his face again—oh, I see,' she added with quiet scorn, 'you have

learnt that your latest rival has quitted the harvest-field, and you are not too proud to take her leavings.'

The colour rose in Clara's cheek as though she had been smitten upon it, but her voice had no trace of anger in it as she replied:

'I have learnt *that*, Lady Trevor—which, by-the-bye, you carefully concealed from me—since I was here last, and also much else that concerns yourself more nearly. I warn you not to burn your boats by insulting me beyond forgiveness.'

'I have no wish to insult you, Clara,' returned the other, in more guarded if still unconciliatory tones; 'but as a woman old enough to be your mother, and with a warm regard for you and yours, it is my duty to point out to you that any persistence on your part in this unhappy matter would be most improper and unmaidenly, humiliating for any woman, but, in the case of a young lady in your position, shameful.'

'Take care what you say, Lady Trevor, or you will repent it. I have come, no matter how, to the knowledge of something, the mention of which will bring you to your knees.'

Lady Trevor trembled, in spite of her utmost efforts to maintain a show of calm. She had uttered that very threat herself to Hugh only a few hours ago. Was it possible that the grounds for it were the same in this case as in that? Was she really in the power of this unscrupulous and masterful girl?

'What I wish to appeal to,' she answered, ignoring (idly enough, as she felt only too well) the other's insolent menace, 'is the proper pride which belongs, not only to your sex, but to your station. I know that to some girls the fact of their rival being in a humbler rank of life than themselves takes half the sting out of a lover's faithlessness; they flatter themselves that the affection he professes for them is of another and finer kind, not to be compared for one instant with the vulgar passion that has for the moment caused him to forget his fealty. But you, whose intuition makes up for your lack of experience of the world, are wiser; *you*——'

'One moment, Lady Trevor,' interrupted Clara; 'let us not again discuss this subject in the absence of a mutual understanding, by the light of which alone it can be viewed aright. If you are speaking of John Beeton's daughter, let me remind you that the difference of birth between herself and you consists only in the order of time! She belongs to the same race as yourself, though of a younger generation. So late as a quarter of a century ago or so, my Lady Trevor, remember you yourself were Letty Beeton!'

CHAPTER XLIV.

MAKING IT UP.

It has been always affirmed, by those philosophers who are given to take cheerful views of life (for other people) that a calamity to which we have been long looking forward is, when it does come, hardly a calamity at all; that the doing away with the suspense and apprehension which it caused us is almost an equivalent for the shock of the blow, if, indeed, it can even be called a shock. On the other hand, it should be considered that the very expectation of its falling has weakened our powers of endurance, and, above all, that the consequences—on account of which we chiefly feared the blow—are still to come.

As Clara's words fell upon Lady Trevor's ears it was no mitigation of her despair that for a quarter of a century she had dreaded nothing so much as their utterance. In that terrible moment she not only saw herself disgraced, but the edifice of deception that she had built up with such care and toil, and which of late seemed so secure and strong, shattered to fragments; the scheme of her life in ruins, and the unhappy lad, for whom it had been devised, exposed to public scorn. And—bitterest blow of all—*she*, too, exposed to *his* scorn, for well she knew he would have no mercy upon her. In that supreme moment of agony it was fortunate for Lady Trevor that her instinct at once prompted her to accept defeat; a weaker woman would have attempted to brave it out, and defy her enemy; she had done so herself, when menaced by Mr. Morris, but she understood that she had now a very different foe to deal with, and that her only hope—if hope there was—lay in that foe's forbearance. How Clara Thorne had discovered the weak place in her armour she had, of course, no conception; but since it was discovered, she made no pretence of the dart not having gone home.

'And now you have found out my secret, Clara Thorne,' she said, drawing herself up to her full height, and speaking with dignity without defiance, 'what are you going to do with me?'

No acknowledgment could have been more complete, no submission more absolute; and yet there was a certain heroism in the confession which preserved it from anything akin to humiliation. She threw herself on the other's mercy, not grovelling on the earth like one who expects a blow, but with a calm acceptance of any fate that might be meted out to her.

Clara was moved as she had never thought to be by anything this woman could have said to her; the agony of the other's face appealed to her heart, but not less than her brave words. She was one who could appreciate courage even in an enemy,

and much more when that enemy lay at her mercy awaiting the stroke. The two women, although their interests had been so conflicting, were in fact kindred spirits.

'If I ask you to spare me,' continued Lady Trevor, perceiving the impression she had produced, 'it will not be for my own sake, but for that of my son, whom you say that you used to love.'

Clara winced at this, for the other had spoken under a misconception of her intentions; and she answered in a harsher voice than her feelings of pity, and even of admiration, prompted, 'Your son, then, knows nothing of this?'

'Hugh? Heaven forbid!' cried the wretched woman, forgetting for the moment that it rested with Clara herself whether he should know it or not. 'No one, so far as I know, has the least suspicion of it except yourself.'

'That is what I wanted to be assured of,' said Clara naïvely, and with a deep sigh of relief. 'It will be your fault, Lady Trevor, and not mine, if any third person ever does know this secret; as for me, I will be as silent as the grave.'

'You noble girl!'

It was a genuine burst of gratitude and admiration, but the other, with a scornful smile of self-depreciation, declined the praise.

'I am certainly not noble, Lady Trevor; though I hope I am not so base as to triumph over a prostrate foe. Like other people, I have my own ends to serve, and though I need no bribe, my silence must have its price.'

'You have only to name it. I am in no position to bargain with you,' she answered, with a faint smile.

'Let us not talk of bargains, Lady Trevor,' said Clara earnestly. 'Let us be henceforth friends and allies. One stipulation only I must insist upon, namely, that you shall be henceforth perfectly frank and open with me. As to the rest, I think you will find me reasonable in my requirements. There is, in fact, only one matter dear to my heart, to which, though you have hitherto opposed it, you can no longer have any objection to offer. Your influence will, I take it for granted, now be used in my favour as regards my relations with your son.'

Lady Trevor stared at her companion in dumb amazement. Was this, then, the girl whom she had credited with such vaulting ambition and such little love, whom she had looked upon as a mere self-seeker—though not indeed of a vulgar type—and incapable of a genuine passion? It was inexplicable to her that, having discovered Hugh was base-born, and might at any moment be deprived of all the privileges and possessions of an elder son, Clara should be still willing, and even eager, to marry him.

'Your silence, Lady Trevor, hardly seems to mean consent,'

continued the other drily ; 'yet only a few hours ago you were good enough to say that against my poor individual self as a daughter-in-law you had nothing to urge, if only my birth and station were equal to those of your son.'

'You mistake me altogether, Clara,' exclaimed Lady Trevor earnestly. 'So far from objecting to what you propose, I was only surprised and astonished at the strength of an attachment which has stood so great a strain. I am well aware, in our changed relations, that it is now you, not I, who, in the alliance of which you speak, will have to stoop, and I thought that, despite your old affection (which I now perceive to be far stronger than I thought it), you would hesitate to marry my poor Hugh.'

'Hesitate? Why should I hesitate because you are John Beeton's daughter instead of some Frenchman's whom one never heard of? Why should I cease to love him because his mother before his birth loved not wisely but too well? When you come to know me better, Lady Trevor, you will have, I hope, a better opinion of my wits than to suppose I set such store on race and lineage as to balk my heart's desire. I see no reason, supposing, as I believe, that Hugh repents of his late wild folly, and is eager to make amends for it, by making me his wife, why you and I should not be friends for life—nay, considering the bond between us, which it will be our common interest to keep concealed, something more than friends,' and with infinite grace she held out both her hands.

Lady Trevor took them cordially ; it was far easier to do so than to speak. She feared to speak, lest in her tone should be read the triumphant joy which filled her soul. So, after all, then, this girl had but discovered half her secret, and that the least important half. Clara knew, indeed, that she was Letty Beeton, but it was now evident she did not know that the son Letty had borne before her marriage was Hugh himself. That son she doubtless imagined, as did every one else, had died in infancy. In Clara's eyes Hugh was still legitimate, and the heir of Mirbridge ; and it was no longer strange, and involved nothing of self-sacrifice, that she should still wish to marry him. For an instant the thought occurred to Lady Trevor's mind to tell Clara the whole truth. The girl had been generous to her, and generosity was owed to her in return, but the long habit of duplicity and concealment was an overmatch for the honourable instinct. Moreover, she feared to trust her. If she told the truth, Clara would certainly no longer wish to marry Hugh, nor would she have that hold on the girl of which she was now possessed ; whereas, if they were once united, even if the other part of her secret should become known to her, it would be to Clara's interest, as she had just said, to prevent the matter going further. With hands still clasped in hers, the girl was looking

into her face with confidence and friendly gaze; she had been frank enough on her part, and suspected no concealment on that of the other.

'We are agreed, then—you are quite sure, Lady Trevor.'

'We are quite agreed, my dear,' was the cheerful response; 'so far as my influence goes, it shall be exerted to the utmost to bring about your marriage, and I may now honestly say the sooner it happens the better I shall be pleased.'

Then she drew the girl towards her—for they were still at arm's length—and kissed her. It was not a very rapturous salute, perhaps, but it sufficed as the seal of their new-made league and covenant.

'And now you must tell me, Clara, that we may be put upon our guard for the future, how you came to know'—here she hesitated a moment, and dropped her voice as she added cautiously—'who I am.'

Then Clara told her how, being requested by her father some weeks ago to examine the parish register, she had accidentally come across the entry of Letty Beeton's birth; how the circumstance had had sufficient interest for her to impress the date upon her memory; and the coincidence of it with Lady Trevor's birthday, as recorded in her locket, and noted by Mrs. Westrop, had convinced her of the actual position of affairs.

'The sword, then, hangs over my head by a horsehair indeed,' was Lady Trevor's melancholy reflection, 'since so slight a thing has carried conviction with it. With a woman so dangerous and mischievous as this Mrs. Westrop—who, moreover, has no love for either of us—how can one ever feel secure?'

'It was, of course, very indiscreet of you,' answered Clara, 'to let that locket,' with such an inscription on it, pass into the hands of anyone—much more of such a gossip as Mrs. Westrop; but the fact of which she has possessed herself is without significance unless, as in my case, she has the other date with which to compare it. It is more valueless—because it suggests nothing—than the half of a five-pound note of which the other is missing. Moreover, her mind cannot possibly be prepared for any discovery, which, to be frank with you in my turn Lady Trevor, my own has long been. I was certain there was some mystery about you—though, of course, I had no suspicion of what nature; and what I have found out to-day is only the answer to a riddle which has puzzled me more or less from the first day you came to Mirbridge.'

Then, at her companion's request she told her what were the circumstances—trivial enough of themselves, but weighty in their cumulative force—which had excited her suspicions. Lady Trevor listened with amazement and alarm. It was only now and then that she had been conscious, in the cases in question of

having incurred danger ; and the reflection that she had so long been watched and suspected by one of whom she had, on her side, entertained no suspicion, sent a thrill of fear through her, even though the peril in which she stood had been averted. At the same time, it was evident that the attributes which had made Clara by far her most dangerous observer would equally fit her to become her most powerful ally, and that it behoved her to knit her to herself by the bond of a common interest as quickly as might be. Of Hugh's readiness to marry the girl she had no doubt : he was not likely to inquire curiously into any change in his father's views that suited with his own inclinations, and she felt sure that she had only to say that Sir Richard's objection to his wedding Clara Thorne had been overcome to satisfy him in that respect. In the meantime she was able to make a show of frankness to Clara, in lieu of that larger confidence which she had not the courage to bestow, in telling her how she had met and foiled the suspicions of the land-agent—a revelation which, chiming in, as it did, with what Clara had learnt from Mr. Gurdon, convinced the girl that she was being treated with entire trust.

Having settled the matter, which concerned them both so nearly, to their mutual satisfaction, they were discussing the subject of Sir Richard's health, which had now acquired a personal interest for Clara, much exceeding neighbourly pity, when a man's step was suddenly heard approaching the boudoir. Whose step it was neither woman had need to be told, and Clara started to her feet at the sound of it.

'Is he coming here ?' she whispered hastily.

'Yes, what does it matter ? Why not see him at once and get it over ?'

It was good advice, but demanded both courage and conduct for its execution ; it was the first time, it must be remembered (save on the occasion when he had cut her), that she had set eyes on Hugh since she had heard of his infidelity to her : and it was no wonder that she hesitated to reply. Her mind was made up for her, however, by the door opening without any preliminary knock, and presenting to her notice the delinquent himself. It would, perhaps, be too bold a statement to say that at the sight of Clara Hugh Trevor looked either ashamed or abashed, but he certainly looked exceedingly discomfited and ill at ease. He murmured something about not knowing that his mother had a visitor, and was about to withdraw in confusion, when Lady Trevor took his hand and stopped him.

'You need not run away from us, my dear Hugh, as conscience prompts you to do, for you have been most undeservedly forgiven your sin. I was just telling Clara that your poor father, whom his state of health no doubt makes changeable,

had expressed himself less unfavourable with regard to matters between you and her, and that if you had not offended her beyond redemption, I was asking her permission to tell you as much. If you will take my advice, you will say nothing of your offence, which, indeed, admits neither of palliation nor excuse, but only of atonement. Take him, my dear,' she added, placing his hand in that of Clara's; 'the culprit acknowledges his crime, and throws himself on your mercy.'

It is doubtful whether, in so expressing herself, Lady Trevor did not run some danger of irritating into opposition one so self-willed and averse to reproof as her son; but she had Clara's feelings to consider in the matter, as well as his own; and with her last word she executed a stroke of strategy which she rightly judged would make up for all short-comings of argument; she quitted the room and left the young people together.

Hugh Trevor, if not exactly a young Lochinvar, could certainly not be accused of being 'a laggard in love,' and the next moment he held his placable, though by no means patient, Griselda in his arms.

CHAPTER XLV.

'ENGAGED.'

It was characteristic of Clara Thorne that, having won the prize which, if it could not be said she had 'set her heart' on, she had certainly striven with all her power to win, she was in no hurry to proclaim the fact. She walked quickly home—alone—from the scene of her victory, and sat down to table (where she made an excellent dinner) without exciting the least suspicion in any member of her family that anything extraordinary had occurred to her. Lucy, indeed, was pleased to see her so serene, a proof, as she imagined, that her sister had 'got over' what had so deeply moved her a few hours ago; her own feeling on the whole was one of satisfaction that, by whatever means, Clara had been balked of her intent to be the bride of Hugh Trevor, a design in which she had foreseen nothing but misery.

Conversation proceeded as usual till the waiting-maid had finished her duties and left the room, when Clara quietly observed, 'I have a bit of news to tell you, dear father and mother, though it will not be altogether news to Lucy; Hugh Trevor has asked me to marry him, and I have accepted him.' She spoke without excitement or emotion of any kind, much as if she were reading aloud some public notice on a wall; but the effect upon her hearers, though in different degrees, was considerable. The Rector put down the walnut he was about to crack, and gazed at his eldest born with tender solicitude.

'My dearest Clara, you surprise me very much ; I hope you have considered this matter, which is the most momentous affair of your life, very carefully.'

'Yes, papa ; I have looked at it, so far as such a thing can be seen from the outside, in all its bearings ; and upon the whole—without pretending to be enraptured by the prospect it presents—I think I am to be congratulated.'

'Then, indeed, my dear,' said the Rector, rising, and kissing her forehead, 'I congratulate you with all my heart.'

His manner was kind, but not effusive ; he had the gravest doubts of the wisdom of her choice, but he knew that to dissuade Clara from what she had once made up her mind to do was an impossibility.

Mrs. Thorne, on the other hand, amazed at the good fortune that had befallen her daughter, as well as at the skill and perseverance with which it had been secured, forgot for the moment, in her maternal pride, her former misgivings ; they were less serious than those entertained by her husband, because she better understood the girl's wondrous strength of character, and knew that she had not those needs for love and sympathy which belonged to others of her sex and age ; her first instinct was to doubt the genuineness of her daughter's news rather than to question its nature.

'But has this arrangement between you two young people,' she inquired, 'received the approbation of Lady Trevor ?'

It was not because Sir Richard was ill that she made no reference to him, but because, like everyone else, Mrs. Thorne understood that in domestic matters he was not, indeed, a cipher, but a Gallio ; that he left everything of that nature in his wife's hands.

'Most certainly it has,' was Clara's quiet rejoinder ; 'she has been so good as to say that, but for my want of fortune, she would have always regarded her son's affection for me with favour ; and since his happiness seems to be bound up in me, she has consented (I must say very graciously and completely) no longer to consider my poverty as an obstacle.'

'My dear child !' exclaimed Mrs. Thorne, embracing her tenderly—a simple ejaculation, but which, from a mother's lips, comprehends so much. Lucy alone said nothing ; her sister's observation that her news would be no news to her robbed her silence of its significance in the eyes of her parents, but in fact she was dumb with amazement. What had become of Clara's recent indignation against Lady Trevor ? of that invitation to Miss Mumchance, with its manifest object, to the Court ? By what marvellous means had her sister made an ally of her most powerful and resolute foe ?

'Considering the state of Sir Richard's health, and that you

have both of you plenty of time before you, I conclude, my dear, suddenly as this matter has been arranged, your engagement will be a long one?' observed Mrs. Thorne. Her tone was as cheerful as she could make it, but, as a matter of fact, she was thinking what opportunities for a slip between the cup and the lip delay would offer.

'On the contrary,' was Clara's dry reply, 'Lady Trevor has urged me to comply with Hugh's desire that our marriage should take place at once. There is no knowing how long Sir Richard may be an invalid; his nerves, it seems, poor man, are in a wretched state, and anything of importance that is left in a state of suspense affects him, she tells me, like an impending calamity. For my part, since the affair is certain to produce a plentiful crop of gossip, the shorter the time it is given to ripen the better. I am not to leave you, you know, mother,' she added in a softened tone; 'while Sir Richard lives, Lady Trevor has stipulated that we should reside at the Court.'

'That is very nice of her,' observed Mrs. Thorne, to whom the information was very welcome, as mitigating that sense of parting which her tender heart could not fail to feel.

'She does not do it for your sake, nor yet for mine, however,' laughed Clara; 'it is because she cannot make up her mind to lose her darling Hugh.'

That was the sole touch of satire with which Clara treated the lady whom she had been so little wont to spare; had her case been another's, the fact of Lady Trevor being about to become her mother-in-law would have accounted for her change of tone is this respect; but, as Lucy at all events well understood, mere 'belonging' would never have dulled the sharpness of her sister's tongue; it was clear that by some means Lady Trevor had secured her allegiance, and that, as it afterwards proved, to an extent which, to say truth, the members of her own family—at least, in the way of freedom from sarcasm—had not enjoyed; for from henceforth not a syllable even in jest ever escaped her to her ladyship's disparagement.

It was no wonder that Lucy was puzzled. Even Charlie noticed the change, and inquired of her by what magic it had taken place. 'There has been no Petruchio as yet,' he remarked, 'to curb the tongue of your Katherine;' an observation which gave Lucy pain, not from the reflection upon Clara's character which it invoked, but from its hint at Hugh's. It reawakened all her old apprehensions of the treatment to which any wife of his was liable to be subjected.

Clara herself, however, seemed to have no fears on this point. She accepted all the congratulations that poured in upon her with genuine satisfaction; the false ones quite as readily as the true; indeed, the former were particularly welcome, as being a

tribute to those powers of fascination on which she prided herself far more than upon more homely virtues. Rarely had a young woman of ambition more cause to plume herself upon the success of her plans. Never were lover, betrothed, and future mother-in-law more in accord as to the desirability of a speedy marriage.

Hugh, of course, was impatient; that little interlude with Jenny Beeton seemed to be as completely forgotten as it had been forgiven, and in no way interrupted the course of his more serious love-making.

The remembrance of it, however humiliating to Clara, was even of some practical benefit, since it suggested another danger in delay. To lose her lover now, by any means, might well have driven even her haughty spirit to despair. As to Lady Trevor, the recollection of her son's late reckless conduct filled her with apprehensions. Should anything happen to Sir Richard, and Hugh become his own master, it was quite possible that some new object of passion might take the place of Clara in his unstable heart, in which case what mercy would she herself be likely to obtain at the hands of such a girl thus wronged?

It was, indeed, of the utmost importance that the marriage should take place as soon as possible, and an early date was fixed for it. In the meantime, the part Lady Trevor had to play was made easy for her by the assistance of her new ally. When Lady Joddrell, under the guise of congratulation, made herself unpleasant with condolements about Clara's want of fortune and position, and even hinted at her having angled for the heir of Mirbridge, she at once referred her to Clara herself.

'She has certainly fascinated my son, and overcome my own natural objections to the match,' she smilingly replied. 'You must ask her, and not me, how she has contrived to do it. I am sure you will find her very frank.'

Lady Joddrell had no doubt of that, and prudently shrank from the inquiry. As to Mrs. Westrop, a much more difficult person to deal with, she had no daughters to dispose of, and felt neither jealousy nor disappointment at the unexpected news.

'For my part,' she said, when Lady Joddrell expressed her indignation at the success of the designing young woman at the Rectory, 'I don't blame the girl for doing the best she can for herself, while if she deserves punishment for her scheming she will certainly get it as Hugh Trevor's wife. My own poor dear was bad enough in many ways, but he was never a brute, as I believe that young man to be. He will probably beat her.'

'Very likely,' said Lady Joddrell, in a tone in which, to say the least of it, there was little disapprobation.

Upon the whole Mrs. Westrop was not displeased; she had not much faith in man when tempted by beauty, and looked upon

Clara's engagement as the withdrawal of a possible obstacle to the success of her plan for Charlie's benefit. She now even believed (so readily do we credit what sorts with our own wishes) that it was for Charlie's sake, and not for Hugh's, that Lady Trevor had invited Miss Munchance to Mirbridge.

But, after all, the person most at fault as to the circumstances which had caused such a revolution in Clara's fortunes was Lucy herself. Her sister had never vouchsafed to her the least explanation of the phenomenon.

When they had met together, as usual, upstairs after that proclamation of the matter in the dining-room, she had naturally looked for details, but Clara had only stated vaguely—but also with a touch of that grim humour which always alarmed the other—that Hugh had been more pressing than usual, and that his mother had shown herself more reasonable than she had expected. Lucy had her fears for Clara's future happiness, as we know, but she chose to look upon the bright side of things, while, as regarded the probable effect of her sister's marriage upon her own affairs, it was certainly favourable. Except in the way of fortune, no objections could be offered to her union with Charlie, save such as had been urged—and been overcome—against her sister. It would certainly tend to draw the two families together, for, however little a man may care for his wife's relations (and Lucy knew that Hugh liked neither her nor hers), it is difficult for a man to make her ignore them when they live in the same parish. As to the matter of fortune, there were now even hopes for Lucy in that direction. Miss Mumchance had written a confidential letter to Mr. Gurdon—a strange thing, perhaps, for her to do, but a woman who has £300,000 of her own can do anything—empowering him, on her behalf, to offer Charles Trevor the agency of her Irish estates, with an income which in Lucy's modest eyes meant wealth. It was understood that this offer was made to enable him to marry the girl of his choice, and Charlie—though, with characteristic consideration, the heiress had left the time for its acceptance almost at his own election—would not have had a moment's hesitation in the matter, but Lucy was by no means so ready. She was touched to the core by her new friend's kindness, and acknowledged it in the tenderest terms; but, for the present, she was firm in her resolve not to leave home. Her mother felt even Clara's departure, and how much more would she feel that of her younger daughter! Her father, too, she well knew, would miss her as though she were his own right hand. She would stay with the old people till, at all events, their wound was healed, and not make a second gap in their little household. What tended to strengthen her resolution was Clara's advice to the same effect. She, too, rather unexpectedly to Lucy—first because she had not given her sister credit for such sensi-

bility, and, secondly, because it argued a valuation of herself in her parents' eyes, of the recognition of which Clara had never before given sign—dwelt upon the melancholy effects which the second blow was likely to have upon the old couple.

'I think you should spare them, if you can, Lucy, at all events for the present. You may justly say,' she added, with her usual frankness, 'that it is easy for me, who am to have my way at once, to preach patience to you, but there is really not the same reason for a hasty marriage in your case that there is in mine. You can depend upon the fidelity of your swain, whatever happens; he is like papa's old mare, which requires no catching, and has only to be shown an empty sieve to bring her nose over the gate at any time; whereas Hugh, I confess, is what Mr. Wurzel calls "chancey."'

The metaphor was not quite to Lucy's liking, but of its applicability there could be no shadow of doubt. Her Charlie did not even need the sieve, but only the bridle. She never guessed, what Clara was far too judicious to hint at, that her sister had hopes of providing for her future without the necessity of her leaving home—or, at all events, of going to Ireland—at all. The thought of inducing Hugh to make some fitting provision for his brother (and, therefore, for Lucy) had always been in her mind; and now, when her affection for her betrothed had certainly not been increased by his recent conduct, she more than ever cherished the idea of making him useful.

CHAPTER XLVI.

WEDDED.

What Sir Richard Trevor thought of the engagement of his son and heir to the Rector's daughter was a matter of speculation to many minds. They pictured him tossing on his restless bed, and combating his lady's arguments, only to be vanquished by them; as, indeed, it was understood, had been the case when he was comparatively hale and well. It would have astonished them very much could they have put aside his curtains and seen how very calm and quiet he lay, without any tumult in his mind at all, but only one absorbing doubt, with which no thought of Miss Clara Thorne had anything to do. That he would never leave his bed again he was well assured, though how long it would be before he exchanged it for the Trevor vault under Mirbridge Church was doubtful; and, under such circumstances, the human mind is apt to dissociate itself from such subjects as a young woman's ineligibility (through want of 'position in the county' or otherwise) for marriage, and to concentrate it upon more important, if less obvious matters. Nevertheless, the sick man had been informed by his wife of the en-

gagement that had been entered into ; and, if it could not be said to have his approval, he had offered no objections. Approval as regarded anything in connection with the doings of his elder son was, indeed, out of the question ; and as for objections, like his wife herself, and for the same reason, there was nothing for him but to submit. She had told him all : how Clara Thorne had gained possession of half her secret, and how necessary it was, for the preservation of the other half, that that young woman should have her way. It was about that other half, as Lady Trevor was well aware, though she did not venture to allude to it, that poor Sir Richard 'lay-a-thinking.'

Like the rest of us, when we come to be on our deathbeds, he had many things to repent of—things done, alas ! as well as things undone ; time misused as well as wasted. It is only *there* that our ill deeds present themselves in their true colours, or perhaps present themselves at all. I was once present at one of those meetings of the Salvation Army where converted persons are invited to stand upon the stool of repentance and confess the wickedness of their past lives. Curiosity, however, I noticed, among the habitual congregation, was only very slightly excited : they were accustomed to the revelations that were about to be given, and knew there would be nothing in them. It almost seemed that, unless for what is vulgarly called 'the look of the thing,' these penitents might just as well have remained unregenerate. According to their own account, they had really never committed any sins worth mentioning ; and in the presence of so much virtue—or, at least, freedom from vice—I felt myself quite abashed. If the spirit had moved me—which I am happy to think it did not—to tell them a few personal experiences of my own, I should have shocked those good people very much ; and yet I should say, upon the whole, as an evil-doer I am rather under than above the average. It was obvious to anyone conversant with human nature that these gentry, who professed to make such a clean breast of it, were making such sweeping 'private reservations' that they might just as well have held their tongues. One of them, indeed, proclaimed he had been a burglar, but that announcement had been discounted. 'The 'Converted Burglar,' had been for days advertised as the great attraction of the meeting. The Confessional of the Salvation Army was evidently a very harmless institution, and, indeed, bordered very closely upon farce. Perhaps the real stool of repentance is only to be found in the Chamber of Death. It is there, too, that men are often brought face to face with a worse thing than the need of repentance—with Remorse. Some wrong they have done to others, and which they have repented of, so far as regret is concerned, in sackcloth and ashes, but unhappily have not remedied.

It was this uninvited visitor who sat with grim visage by poor Sir Richard's pillow, and waited for his 'Yea' or 'Nay.'

The excuse which Lady Trevor put forth for holding a marriage feast in a house of sickness was that her husband had expressed himself unwilling that his malady should in any way interfere with or delay the happiness of the young people. And it was true that in general terms he had often expressed himself to that effect. Not so much through philanthropy (though he was a kindly hearted man) as through an antagonism to all that was conventional (or perhaps respectable), it had been his wont to maintain that the poor sum of human happiness ought never to be subtracted from unnecessarily—that funerals, for example, should not be permitted to postpone weddings, and would even half-cynically hint that the baked meats of the one might, in the interests of economy, furnish forth the feast of the other. But as for the particular marriage at present in view, it is doubtful whether Sir Richard had said much about it. Since silence gives consent, it might, however, be considered that he had consented to it, for it was a subject on which he had spoken scarcely at all, not because he took no interest in it—though in the parties concerned it must be owned he took uncommonly little—but because of its connection with that other matter which lay so heavily upon his mind. It was impossible to conceal from himself that, in allowing Clara Thorne to marry Hugh—no matter what might be the mercenary influences that actuated her—another victim beside his younger son was about to be sacrificed to what Lady Trevor euphemistically termed 'the exigencies of our position.' They were obtaining a daughter-in-law—though, it was true, unsought—under false pretences. This troubled her ladyship, in comparison with other matters, but very little. If she had qualms about it, they were not so much of conscience as of apprehension of Clara's wrath if she should ever come to know the truth. Her mind, too, was just now full of affairs, preparations, correspondence, and the like, in the turmoil of which she at least found forgetfulness. But to Sir Richard, prone upon his pillow, with the knowledge that the window opposite would presently become to him 'a glimmering square,' this consideration forced itself upon his attention. How much he thought of it, however, his wife little suspected. He had given in to her arguments as to the necessity of the marriage taking place, and it was not worth while to make a stand on a single point when he had long ago given way on all others in connection with it. As to the time, if the marriage was to be on the morrow or next year—supposing him to be still alive—that seemed to him of small consequence. To Lady Trevor, on the other hand, it was of most pressing urgency.

The condition of Sir Richard, of course, put all ideas of public

festivity out of the question, a circumstance by no means in itself to be deplored. There would have been something that to her mind would have seemed to court rather than defy inquiry, had Hugh been married with all that flourish of trumpets that became his supposed position in the county. To get it done in so quiet a manner was, apart from the sad cause for quietness, a matter on which she had indeed much cause for congratulation. In this, too, she found sympathizers in all the inmates of the Rectory. The bride's ambition was of the practical sort ; she was well content to enjoy her triumph without spectators; while her mother, though she allowed herself some pardonable pride in her daughter's new position, had little taste for pomps and vanities of any kind. It was sufficient for her that her remaining daughter should accompany her sister to the altar, though as her only bridesmaid ; and that her husband, unassisted by dean or bishop, should perform the ceremony. Mr. Thorne did indeed suggest to Lady Trevor that it would be a kindly recognition of old times to invite Canon Spenser, as a friend of the family, and a former Rector of Mirbridge, to help him to tie the knot, but the proposition was received with unmistakable disfavour.

'If the Canon were to come, my dear Mr. Thorne, it is certain he would wish to see my husband, to whom every species of excitement has been forbidden, you know, by the doctor.'

The injunction must indeed have been a strict one, since it not not only shut out the Rector himself from the sick-room, but even the bride and bridegroom. The circumstance of Sir Richard not even bidding them good - bye would certainly have occasioned some scandal, but that on the morning of the wedding the invalid was understood to have suffered a slight relapse, which put his doing so out of the question. No doubt, thought those who beheld the gloom on Dr. Ward's handsome face, it was the knowledge of his patient's precarious position that overshadowed it, and made him so very unlike a marriage guest. He came, indeed, to the modest feast at the Court, but not till after the happy couple had been whisked away by their four posters over the snow; and to witness their marriage he could not bring himself. He went to the church, as in duty bound, but the sight of the lovely Clara attired for the altar was too much for him; and, under pretence of an urgent message from a patient—the first professional advertisement the young fellow, to do him justice, had ever feigned—he fled the spectacle of what he called her sacrifice to Mammon. The phrase was a severe one, and, at all events, quite uncalled for upon his part, since she had never shown the least desire to be sacrificed to Æsculapius ; but he was not the only one who did not look

upon Mr. Hugh Trevor as the ideal of love's young dream in Clara's eyes. Mrs. Grange had come back from town, where she had seen her son happily united to his beloved, with no very high opinion of the gentleman who, in his character of bridegroom, she privately stigmatized as 'Jenny's leavings;' she was old-fashioned, and entertained the complacent conviction that, if she had been in Miss Clara's place, she would not have permitted him to transfer his affections to herself with such abruptness. That Clara knew of that little episode she had not a shade of doubt; but, on the other hand, the housekeeper was both discreet and loyal, and not a word escaped her lips that could lead anyone else to guess at it.

Mr. John Beeton, naturally enough, also listened to the vows of the young squire with cynical incredulity. Delicacy of feeling might have kept others in his place absent from the wedding; nor did any interest in the bridegroom—unless, indeed, such can be said to be evoked by an unmitigated detestation—attract him thither. But curiosity and the allurements of a gratuitous entertainment were too strong for him. The knowledge that there was plenty of good liquor provided at the Court for all who had witnessed the ceremony may also have influenced his conduct.

Mr. Smug was another person who entertained no high opinion of Mr. Hugh Trevor as a bridegroom, but he, too, kept it to himself. Though he would doubtless have resented the appellation as anything but a compliment, the preacher was a man of honour. The notion of making mischief between high and low, which to some persons in his position would have been an irresistible temptation, was abhorrent to him. Such was his simplicity that he could not imagine the bride to be cognizant of Hugh's late peccadillo (which it is probable he would have designated by a very different name), and regarded her, with sad forebodings, as an innocent and unconscious victim to a libertine. Her beauty had awakened in him a homage (though of a very different kind) as genuine as in the breast of the young doctor himself; and it is probable, even if his objections to prelatical observances had not kept him absent from the ceremony, that he would not have 'had the heart' to witness it. He missed, however, a most charming sight. Never had the old church, still gay with its Christmas decorations, held so lovely and majestic a bride. Lady Trevor, herself, who had so many reasons for regretting that she was compelled to welcome Clara Thorne as a daughter-in-law, could not withhold her unstinted admiration for so much grace and beauty. Even the bride's own mother seemed for the first time to become aware of those transcendent charms which drew the tears of pride to her tender eyes.

Nor can it be denied that Hugh himself looked every inch a

bridegroom. His face was always a striking one, and would have been handsome but for its expression, which was generally either cynical or morose ; but, as Lady Trevor would sometimes remark, with a *naïveté* very foreign to her character : 'There is no one looks more charming, when he is pleased, than my son Hugh.' On the present occasion he might well look pleased (without deserving much praise for being so good as to be in a good temper), and he did so. The question, however, that occurred to more than one spectator who watched his smiling gaze as it rested upon his lovely bride, was, 'I wonder how long it will last.'

The smile of his best man, Mr. Gurdon, who was otherwise by no means to be compared with him for good looks, was, on the other hand, one of the pleasantest sights in that gay scene, and seemed to emit a whole atmosphere of good-humour. It was obviously the outcome of a kind and cheerful nature, and made to last. His hostess had been long greatly indebted to it, especially in the maintenance of peace between her two sons during the last eventful days. 'Never so near as when we part,' says the proverb; but the brothers had never been so near a quarrel as when they were about to part. Hugh had considered the occasion of his own marriage an opportune one for dropping more than one hint of the absurdity of penniless younger sons entangling themselves with portionless girls.

CHAPTER XLVII.

COMING HOME.

THE young couple had been away a month; one of almost unmixed felicity to the other young couple they had left behind them. Charlie felt that he was at home indeed in the absence of his elder brother. His mother unswayed by favoritism, permitted her natural affection for him to take its course, and had never shown herself so kind. The relief she experienced in Hugh's marriage was extreme, and but for her anxiety upon Sir Richard's account—who had grown rather worse than better—she felt more lightened of her load of care than she had done for years. She hardly regretted that half her secret had been discovered, since it had fallen into hands so capable and willing to guard it; and comforted herself ten times a day with the reflection that Hugh had married a wife whose intelligence and strength of character would supply much of what he lacked, and keep him straight in the path of life. This reflection helped to incline her heart toward Lucy, whom, indeed, her judgment—seldom at fault when unperverted by prejudice—had always highly approved. However much a union between that young

lady and her second son was to be deprecated, it was clear to her that if Clara wished it, the thing must be; she was in no position to withstand her will, and to say the truth, was not much moved to do so. She had never felt greatly interested in the future of her younger son ; and now that Hugh had failed to ally himself with 'a county family,' it was not worth while to look in that direction for his brother.

Upon Lucy the effect of all this was, of course, exceedingly favourable ; it almost seemed to her that she had now two homes in Mirbridge instead of one. The arrival of Miss Mumchance, who came over to spend a week or two at the Court according to promise, was, too, a far from unwelcome event. She had a genuine liking for this good-natured heiress, who, with characteristic consideration pairing off with Mr. Gurdon, left her Charlie more entirely to herself than if there had been no visitor at all. The one thing that interfered with her complete contentment was the fear that Clara might not be enjoying so happy a lot ; for though the letters she occasionally received from her hinted at nothing amiss, she seemed to read between the lines that all was far from well with her. That Clara should write after the manner of brides during their honeymoon was not to be expected ; she was not the sort of young person to be blinded by a rose-coloured atmosphere of limited extent, and was as little likely to be intoxicated with bliss as with alcohol. Still, a few more references to the husband of her choice, thought Lucy, would not have been out of place ; and when she did mention him she might have expressed herself more tenderly. Had that battle for Who should be Master already begun, she wondered, in the very lists of love? To picture Clara as vanquished was difficult indeed ; but unless her success had been so complete as to warrant her in ignoring her adversary, her style was not certainly that of a victor. Both the matter and manner of her letters were just as they used to be—frank, cynical, and affectionately patronizing—but, reading them with critical eyes, Lucy discerned in them the traces of effort. If Clara was unhappy, this was exactly what was to have been expected, for her pride would never have permitted her to own that she had missed the aim of her life.

The bridegroom wrote one solitary letter to his mother, in which the only reference to his wife was incidental, and contained in the pronoun 'we.' 'We are coming home,' he said, 'on the 15th.' In the postscript—perhaps because, like the fair sex, he was accustomed to put the most important subject in the addendum, but more likely because he had almost forgotten it—he asked after Sir Richard's health. Lady Trevor was distressed, but not surprised. As to his father, she was well aware that there was no love lost—for years there had never been any—

between him and his son ; and as to his wife, she had better reasons than Lucy to apprehend that there had been quarrels between the newly-married pair. It is certainly much better for the general happiness that 'masterful' men and women should marry one another, and not make two 'incompatible' couples instead of one ; but two thunderclouds cannot be expected to come together without explosions. What she hoped for, if the contest should be still undecided when the happy pair came home, was that her influence might make peace between them, or such a semblance of it as might enable them to 'get on' together ; it was not a very pleasant outlook, but she was far more used to see 'the ragged rims of thunder looming low' about her than cloudless sunshine.

The Turtle Doves, as Charlie called them, came home on the day appointed, but at an earlier hour than they had named. The two young men were out shooting—or rather Charlie was shooting, and Mr. Gurdon with him in the character of critic and sporting prophet, for which he was not worse qualified than critics and prophets sometimes are—and Lady Trevor received them alone.

She gave her daughter-in-law an affectionate embrace, to which Clara for the moment responded, then suddenly became a lay figure. To stiffen and thaw is common enough, but the reverse process is more unusual ; nevertheless, Lady Trevor, without taking notice of it, made a shrewd guess at its cause. Clara had resolutely sat herself against her—though as to the reason she, of course, knew nothing—but had been overcome for the moment by the genuineness of her welcome. She was persuaded that, with all her faults, the girl had a good heart, and was resolved to win it. It was very hard, that for something Clara had to find fault with in her husband she should thus visit it upon his mother ; but she was used to find things hard.

'My darling Hugh, how glad I am to see you back again !'

He gave her a peck or two in exchange for her loving kisses, but his eyes had no answering love in them ; they were, indeed, fixed upon his wife (who, whether from delicacy or indifference, had turned her back upon them both) with a most unmistakable expression of disfavour.

'How is the governor ?' he inquired in a tone which, however wanting in tenderness, certainly betrayed no lack of interest.

'Alas ! my dear, no better.'

'Ah !' he said ; and in his gloomy face, still fixed upon his wife, satisfaction seemed to mingle with menace.

It was a dreadful home-coming.

'I will show you your room, my dear Clara,' said Lady Trevor, 'and then you will be ready, I am sure, for a cup of tea.'

'Thank you, no; I will run over to see mamma, and take tea at home,' said Clara.

Her tone was resolute; there was no cynical stress upon the words 'at home,' strangely as they sounded, applied by a bride's lips to another roof, in the house of her husband. She used them with perfect naturalness.

'But this is your home now, my dear,' said Lady Trevor, forcing a laugh; 'though I know from experience how difficult it is to shake off old associations.'

It was an unfortunate speech, as she felt the moment it was uttered, but Clara took no notice of it.

'I shall be back to dinner,' she said; 'no doubt you and your son will like to have some talk together.'

'You and your son!' not even 'you and Hugh,' far less 'you and my husband!'

'Good heavens! what is the meaning of this, Hugh?' sighed Lady Trevor, as Clara closed the door behind her.

'Temper is the meaning of it,' she answered grimly.

'But to leave me the moment she has arrived, and to call the Rectory still her home, Hugh!—there must have been some terrible quarrel between you.'

'There has been nothing else but quarrels. I wish to heaven that the Rectory *was* her home, and that she had never left it! That woman is a devil; but she shall find that I'm a devil too when the time comes!'

To judge by his face, distorted with hate and rage, it seemed as if the time had already come.

'Oh, Hugh, this is too much!' groaned his unhappy mother. 'You will break my heart between you!'

'I will break hers before I've done with it!' he answered, with an oath. 'What you have seen just now is quite a favourable specimen of her conduct. *You* seem afraid of her.' (Lady Trevor's heart sunk within her; could he have really noticed *that?*) 'I'm *not.*'

He paced the room like an imprisoned wild beast whose dinner had been delayed.

'I suppose as long as my father lives I must put up with her, or seem to do so. It will not do to have a row in the house.'

'Good heavens, Hugh! Would you make your marriage a public scandal?'

'Scandal! What do I care about scandal? Yes, it is likely enough, if she continues as she has begun, that I shall give the public something to talk about. I mean to have my own way in my own house at any cost—that is, to *her.* From what you told me, however, when I wanted to marry Jenny—and I wish to heaven I *had*—I conclude I am not yet my own master.

He turned upon his heel as he put that question, and looked at his mother very keenly.

'You are certainly not your own master in any sense,' she answered gravely. 'You are talking like a madman!'

'Never mind that! Leave me and my madness alone, if you please. I want a plain answer to a plain question. Do I still stand in the same danger—I mean as regards my father's power to do me an injustice—as you said was the case two months ago?'

'Most certainly you do. Let me tell you this, and lay it to your heart as though they were the last words your mother had to speak, that the conduct you propose to yourself as regards your wife will result in your utter ruin.'

'You think so!' he answered defiantly.

'I am quite convinced of it.'

'All right. Then we must have patience. In the meantime "Mum's" the word. By-the-bye, where is Miss Mumchance?'

'She has gone back to Catesby.'

'What a fool I was not to have married *her!*'

'You said the same of Jenny a minute ago, Hugh,' sighed Lady Trevor reproachfully.

'Well, of course I should prefer any wife to the one I've got. Miss Mumchance has money; but, on the other hand, I should have had my own way with Jenny. I owe her father something, by the way, for the ill turn he did me, and I'll pay *him* out when the time comes for wiping out old scores. There are certain debts which if one can't settle punctually, one pays—very willingly—with interest!'

'Great Heaven! is it possible,' she broke forth, 'that you return to your old home, a month after marriage, full of nothing but malicious and revengeful thoughts? Is your dying father nothing in your eyes? am I, who have sacrificed so much for you, nothing? Is there no tie to bind you? is no one's interest, no one's happiness, to be consulted, but only your own reckless and cruel will?'

She spoke with vigour and indignation enough. For the first time the consciousness that the feet of the idol she had so long worshipped were of clay was borne in upon her, and she was courageous with the courage of despair.

'Come—I say—just draw it mild,' he answered sullenly

It is said that though men have confessed to the commission of all other crimes, no man has ever owned himself an ingrate. But many a man has felt himself to be one, and the reflection has only made him the more bitter against his benefactor. This was Hugh Trevor's case. His intelligence was far too keen to allow himself to be deceived as to his own character; he saw he was selfish and brutal quite as clearly as those who disliked him, who were all those who knew him save one, but that that one—

the only friend he had in the world—should herself begin to recognise his worthlessness, he resented exceedingly. That opposition should have arisen in such a quarter, indeed, provoked him above measure, for there is nothing which arouses the rage of the tyrant so much as the revolt of the slave. What still more increased his wrath was the necessity of concealing it from her, which he had hitherto never given himself the trouble to do.

'It's deuced hard to find one's own mother against one,' he murmured, after a long silence. It was at the best a whining plaint; but to her it was addressed to, already repenting of her harshness to her misguided boy, it seemed to be laden with reproachful pathos.

'Against *you!* Oh, Hugh, Hugh! how little you read your mother's heart!'

Dissolved in tears, she flung her arms about his neck and strained him to her heart; for Nature gives to mothers a love-potion far more potent and more blinding than that which caused Queen Titania to apostrophize her long-eared swain as 'My gentle joy.'

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE LAST APPEAL.

THE quarrels of lovers are said to be the renewal of love; but those of married couples have by no means the same result. The more frequent are the fractures, the more difficult it becomes 'to make the join,' even with the best matrimonial cement; and of this material Hugh Trevor and his wife had a very scanty stock indeed. At present they did not quarrel; because, though under the same roof, they never met except at meals, and in company with others. But the remembrance of their strife was keen and fresh, and required no effort to keep it so. Clara's attitude was passive; but no thought of conciliation, far less of reconcilement, ever entered her mind. Hugh was passive, too, because he was biding his time, awaiting the hour when he should have a free hand, when he meant to use it—as a fist. She was well aware of this, and trembled, though more with hate than fear. She had not overrated her own courage and firmness; but she had not understood the 'resources of civilization' which marriage puts in man's power to use in aid of his authority. She was a woman who would have won the love of any ordinary husband; or, failing that, have got the upper hand of him. But Hugh Trevor was not an ordinary man; his nature was brutal; and though, as we know, she had

not been blind to his temper, nor even to his vices, she had not calculated upon *that*. This is a matter which no cultured woman can guard against, because she has no experience of it beforehand ; she takes it for granted that every man is at least human. When Hugh Trevor's anger was aroused, he was a brute—'not four-footed, my dear,' as Mrs. Westrop subsequently described him to Miss Mumchance, 'but cloven-footed. Some men are so.' The general public were neither so shrewd nor so frank as the plain-spoken widow ; but everyone soon came to know that the marriage was an unhappy one. Clara was very reticent about herself to her own belongings, but the Rector and his wife were very miserable about her, and Lucy well-nigh hopeless. Still, though some people looked for it when Sir Richard should be removed and Sir Hugh reign in his stead, there was no public scandal. The Rectory folk went in and out at the Court as usual, and the two families were drawn daily more and more together, as though between the newly-married pair there had been a bond instead of a rift.

The high spirits of Charlie and the good-humour of Mr. Gurdon kept the domestic atmosphere sweet and wholesome, which would otherwise have been almost unfit to breathe. The course of true love in the former's case was moving smoothly enough, so far as it went, though how the ways and means were to be provided for the support of the young couple when they became one was still in doubt. The dream Clara had entertained of persuading her husband, when he should come into his property, to make a fit provision for his younger brother was, of course, at an end; and rudely indeed had she been awakened from it. But as Charlie had never guessed at its existence, that made no matter to him ; his cheerful nature, like the dial, noted only the sunny hours, and had no forebodings for the future. In that house of care, however, even his light-heartedness sometimes unwittingly cast a shadow. The talk at dinner on a day when the Rectory folk were present happened to turn upon the vagaries of memory. He described a recognition that had taken place at his club between two old fogies who had not met for years. 'Surely,' said one, cheerily stretching out his hand, 'your name is Martin ?' The other, though with less of gush, admitted that it was ; and added, 'Yours is Day, I think.' 'To be sure—to be sure,' was the joyous reply. 'Dear me, how the years roll by ! What wild oats we have sown together, you and I ! though, after all, nothing to be ashamed of. By-the-bye, that reminds me : what has become of that ne'er-do-well cousin of yours—one had a liking for him with all his miserable faults—poor Jack ?' 'Sir,' replied the other, drawing himself up very stiffly, '*I* am Jack.'

An unfortunate case of incomplete recollection that drew a

smile even from Lady Trevor. Upon that text, however, the Rector delivered an essay upon the powers of memory.

'There is no such thing as forgetting,' he observed; 'we may not get hold of the right thread at first, but however lost one may flatter himself his past to be in the mist of years, it is certain, if he comes into contact with those who knew it, to be sooner or later remembered and identified with him.'

No sermon the Rector had preached from pulpit ever went home to sinner as did that aimless observation of his made 'across the walnuts and the wine.' Months ago, when there would have been none to note its application to her own case, Lady Trevor would have borne the terrors it awoke in her heart without flinching; but the consciousness of Clara's presence made it intolerable, and she was within an ace of fainting away.

'My nerves are not what they used to be, my dear,' she piteously confessed to her daughter-in-law—who had with great tact and promptitude concealed the agitation of her hostess, and covered her retreat from table—'and sometimes I feel as though I must break down.'

She had much more, as we know, to try her nerves than Clara had any idea of, and presently an incident took place which increased the strain upon them.

It was by this time well understood that Sir Richard would never 'be himself' again; that it was only a question of months, perhaps even of weeks, as to when he should join company with his grim forefathers in the Trevor vault, and Hugh was already assuming some of the prerogatives of a proprietor. People were civil to him who did not love him, for it is a good Christian indeed who does not pay his orisons to the rising sun. Where he showed his turn for mastery was in the direction of severity, and against poachers in particular he did not bear the sword in vain. He would fain have been a sportsman himself, though Nature had been chary to him in that matter, for he was neither a good rider nor a good shot, and under his delegated sway the game was preserved at Mirbridge with much greater strictness than of old. Under such circumstances, it was by no means strange that Mr. John Beeton, who could no more abstain from shooting a hare when it came in his way (or, to say truth, from going out of his way to shoot it) than a drunkard can abstain from the glass, should get into trouble with the keepers of the Court. Hitherto he had had a certain license, though of a tacit kind; it had been understood that Sir Richard, for the sake of old times, did not wish 'honest John's' peccadilloes to be severely dealt with, and what sort of game was in the pot at Spinney Cottage was not inquired into. But somehow it got abroad that Sir Hugh that was soon to be by no means shared his father's liking for Mr. Beeton, and would even be glad to

see him 'trounced;' and being caught one day with a hare in one pocket and a pheasant in the other, he was promptly taken up, and reserved for the judgment of the Bench. Hugh announced the fact at dinner on the very day it had occurred, with every sign of satisfaction, and expressed his intention of attending the Petty Sessions the next day to hear the sentence passed on 'the old scoundrel.'

A most uncomfortable silence ensued upon this piece of intelligence. Charlie was distressed at it on 'the poor governor's' account, whom he knew, if he came to hear of it, it would annoy exceedingly. Clara was disgusted, Lady Trevor alarmed and horrified. It was terrible to her to think that this man (who, whatever was to be said against him, was, after all, her own brother) was about to be committed to prison at the instance of her own son. To do her justice, she was so shocked by it that the thought never entered her mind of how the ignominy would, with tenfold force, recoil upon herself if at any time her secret should be discovered. To Clara, however, this occurred at once, and she did not hesitate to point it out to the unhappy woman. What she might have spared her, but did not, was to indicate the motive by which Hugh was actuated.

'This is a mean revenge, Lady Trevor,' she remarked, 'for this man's having complained of your son's behaviour to his daughter. It must be put a stop to, *at all hazards*.'

The advice which involved such frightful peril was uttered with cold decision.

'How *can* it be stopped?' groaned the other.

'You are the best judge of that,' was the unflinching reply; 'but since I bear your son's name, I will not have it connected with such an act of baseness. I will not share with you the shame that may hereafter come of it. It is, moreover, an indirect insult to myself. He must withdraw from the prosecution.'

Of her daughter-in-law's resolute and masterful character Lady Trevor was well aware; but there was a significance, as well as an audacity, in the other's speech which did not escape her ear. Was it possible that Clara had guessed, or at all events had begun to suspect, that *second part* of her dread secret which had so carefully been withheld from her? Lady Trevor's blood ran cold within her at the thought. She would almost have preferred to know the worst, to ask the question, 'Do you know all, then?' but that she lacked the courage.

'Perhaps—Heaven knows—I may be able to persuade him,' she murmured doubtfully.

'Forgive me for saying there is no perhaps in the matter. It is absolutely necessary that you should do so, Lady Trevor.'

It was an unmistakable menace. The voice that uttered it trembled with suppressed passion, and Lady Trevor trembled

too, with fear. She felt like one beneath the upper and the nether millstone; she was being ground to powder between two iron wills. It was necessary for her, nevertheless, to act, and she sent for Hugh at once to come to her boudoir. If she had given herself more time for reflection, it would have been better for her. The interview between mother and son was the stormiest they had ever had, and, what was unusual indeed, it was Lady Trevor who showed the less self-control. She lost not so much her temper as her head, and reproached him roundly, while he listened with a moroseness that grew more dogged with every word. Finally she used the argument which on the last occasion she had found so efficacious.

'I tell you now, as I told you before, Hugh, that you are mistaken in supposing your future position a secure one. When your father comes to know of your behaviour in this matter, if you are so mad as to persist in it, it may prove your ruin.'

'Then it seems he doesn't know of it yet?' he answered, with a cunning sneer; 'and since no one goes near him but yourself, I shall know whom I have to thank, if any harm comes of it.'

She felt too late what a fatal mistake she had made in not having armed herself with her husband's authority beforehand, and answered despairingly:

'Then you will do nothing for my sake, ungrateful boy?'

'I will not do *this*, at all events,' he answered sullenly. 'I don't see what you have to do with John Beeton one way or the other. If I did, however, it would be all the same. I mean to have him punished. You say "out of revenge;" well, let it be so. You tell me that I am beloved by nobody. Very good. Let me be feared instead, which makes people equally civil.'

His look, his tone, even to a mother's eye and ear, were brutal. For the second time in her life Lady Trevor's faith in her idol was shaken to its foundations. Was it the association of ideas that caused her to speak of one who, she well knew, deemed him clay from head to foot? Some mechanical force, at all events, rather than hope of such an argument having any weight, caused her to say:

'Your wife is entirely of my opinion that your persistence in the prosecution of this unhappy man would be most deplorable.'

'*Is* she? Then that settles it!' he answered with a savage sneer. 'Let her keep her pity for herself, for she will want it!'

And in a whirlwind of passion he flung himself out of the room.

CHAPTER XLIX.

'SEND FOR SPENSER.'

ON the evening of that interview with her elder son, Lady Trevor did not appear in the drawing-room, but remained upstairs on the plea of having 'one of her dreadful headaches.' The statement was true enough, but it was not the true reason. Physically, she was as capable of bearing pain and concealing it as the Spartan boy with his bagged fox, but meet her daughter-in-law with the confession 'I have failed' she dared not. It was the first time in her life that she had shrunk from meeting her enemies in the gate; but the poor woman had come to the end of her courage. Clara, of course, knew she had been beaten; but if she had not known, the triumphant malice in her husband's face as he sat at the breakfast-table would have informed her of it. He went off early in the dog-cart to the neighbouring town, where the Petty Sessions were held; he was not wanted as a witness, but could not deny himself the pleasure of 'seeing justice done,' as he termed it, upon the man he hated. There was little chance that he would be disappointed; for not only was the law against the poacher clear, but the Bench was composed of preserving squires who would not be altogether sorry that Sir Richard was not among them, with 'his queer French notions,' to give his voice for mercy.

Mercy, too, had been advocated by another person who had come up early to the Court that morning to see its mistress—Mr. Smug.

'This prosecution of John Beeton by your son, madam,' he had boldly said, 'is to us who alone know his motive nothing less than an infamy. My lips are sealed as regards his shameful behaviour to that man's daughter by my promise to you, and on that account I think I have some claim upon you in this matter. That Beeton is an evil-doer I admit, but the Law must not be used to gratify a rich man's revenge.'

Lady Trevor made no defence, but with rare tears bewailed her powerlessness to interfere.

'I pity you, madam,' said the preacher, at the conclusion of that most painful interview; 'but I also blame you. You have transformed, by your own foolish fondness for this son of yours, what should have been a blessing to a curse. You tell me that he fears no man; let him beware of the Living God.'

Mr. Smug's exhortations had not the repose of Lady Vere de Vere, nor the honey of the fashionable preacher, but when he was deeply moved they had a certain eloquence. Lady Trevor felt as though not only were all earthly friends deserting her, but that the Heavenly Powers (which had hitherto maintained

an armed neutrality) were about to declare themselves against her and hers.

At mid-day Hugh returned, silent and sullen. Even as he drove through the village in the dog-cart, it was observed that the young squire had 'seemingly swallowed summut as didn't agree with him.' If observation had been keener, it would have remarked that the groom behind him had 'swallowed summut' which had had an opposite effect. He was, in fact, almost bursting with the most scandalous and delightful news: in five minutes it was known among the household of the Court that, though John Beeton had got three months' imprisonment, he had 'taken it out' of Master Hugh by a torrent of vituperative accusation which had electrified all who had heard him. His character, never spotless, had not suffered half the ignominy through his going to gaol that had been inflicted upon his prosecutor by his revelations. The whole story of the young man's ambition to become his son-in-law had been told in public, and had certainly lost nothing in the telling.

Hugh did not appear at luncheon, and the family knew nothing of his disgrace; though the satisfaction that overspread Mr. Cadman's face, as he handed the side-dishes, might well have aroused suspicion. He would have given a month's wages to have mustered courage to tell them; but the catastrophe was too overwhelming to be revealed.

Before the meal was over, Dr. Ward made his usual call, and went up at once to the sick man. On all other occasions Lady Trevor had accompanied him; but, as ill-luck would have it, he was for once left alone with his patient for a few minutes. He found him rather better, and more inclined to talk than usual. The doctor, who had been summoned elsewhere that morning, and had had no time to listen to gossip, was unaware of what had happened at the Sessions; but he knew that John Beeton had been caught poaching on the previous day, and he casually alluded to it as a matter with which Sir Richard must needs be acquainted. So little importance, indeed, did he attach to the communication, that he never attributed to it the change that took place in his patient's face at the moment it fell upon his ear. The case was one that was subject to sudden relapses, and he concluded that the wild twitching of those haggard features was due to one of them. This view, indeed, was corroborated by the yearning cry of 'Nannie, Nannie,' that at the same time broke from the sick man's lips; it seemed but the natural appeal of one who felt himself in mortal straits to his best friend and comforter. Yet when his wife came, not a word did Sir Richard utter; but lay like one already dead and dumb.

'It is his worst bout,' whispered the doctor in reply to Lady

Trevor's look of agonized inquiry; 'and yet he seemed much better when I came. . . . We were, in fact, discussing the news of the village.'

It was unnecessary for Lady Trevor to ask, 'What news?' The occurrence she had fondly hoped to keep from the dying man had, she felt, already reached his ear; and in his glazing eye she read his passionate desire to speak with her alone concerning it, while speech should yet be possible to him. It was terrible, while the precious time was flitting by, to have to mark his impatience for the doctor to be gone; and, as often happens, though he knew his ministrations were useless, he tarried long, as though solicitude were succour. At last, however, he departed, and husband and wife were left alone.

'John Beeton—prison—Hugh—it must not be!' were the words that fell from her husband's lips, like the last drops of an emptying jar, as she leant over his pillow.

She could fill up what was wanting in that thick and broken utterance only too well.

Ill as he was, Sir Richard had grasped the whole situation, and, understanding the meanness of his son's intention, was urgent that it should not be carried into effect. There was a faint colour, too, in his pale cheek that spoke of wrath; indignation that his authority should have been thus usurped and misused before the breath was out of his body. What was worse than all, his tone, to her sensitive and shrinking ear, had the accents of despair, because, as she translated it, so harsh and base an heir was to succeed him. To deceive him in what, it seemed to her, might be his last moments was impossible. She had duped his mother upon her deathbed; but this was her own husband, to whom she had sworn fealty.

'Alas! Richard, it is too late,' she moaned; 'John has been sent to gaol.'

'To gaol?' he exclaimed with sudden vehemence, and raising himself an inch or two in the bed; 'to gaol? and by your son! Oh! Nannie, Nannie; shame upon us both!' then sank back gasping upon his pillow. She watched him with dry eyes and aching heart for many minutes, in doubt whether he was alive or dead. Was that last utterance, with its bitter reproach, to be his farewell words to her? Presently, however, though his eyes remained closed, his lips moved again: 'Send for Spenser,' they murmured.

Was his mind wandering, or had she not heard aright? Such were the fleeting hopes that crossed her mind as she caught that brief and most unexpected injunction. In her heart of hearts she knew that her ears had not deceived her, and that the dying man was only too well aware of his own needs. Never since they had returned to Mirbridge had he expressed the least desire to

see its whilom Rector, and it had been a source of satisfaction to them both that the living to which the Canon had been appointed was too remote to admit of his paying them a visit. There was danger in his doing so, for he had known Letty Beeton well, and had even given his opinion as to what should be done when that scandal at the Court, because of her, had brought Sir Marmaduke to his knees both to presbyter and priest. Mr. Smug, as we know, had been for reparation and marriage, to which the old Baronet had apparently opposed himself, though, more for reasons of his own than from any arguments addressed to him from without, he had in the end privately consented to it; but the Canon, though a kindly man, had thrown his weight into the other scale. Even at this distance of time Lady Trevor resented the fact, and bore him no goodwill in consequence. What could Sir Richard have in his mind that he should wish this man to be sent for *now?* The answer, alas! suggested itself only too readily. Many a man who has no belief in the Apostolic Succession yet yearns upon his deathbed for a father confessor. Her husband had solemnly promised her never to reveal to Hugh the illegitimacy of his birth, and if not to him, it had seemed unlikely indeed that he should confide such a secret to another. But it might well be that, influenced by this crowning act of insolence and brutality of his elder son, the father had resolved to take from him the power of working evil, at once and for ever. That such a revelation would mean for herself social ruin was the reflection which alone had hitherto sealed his lips, she knew, and it was more than probable that, face to face with death, even this consideration had lost its force with him. There was, indeed, no other reason to be given for such a strange request. She dared neither to comply with or disobey it, but stood watching her husband's wan, expressionless face, with a secret hope (which nevertheless filled her with horror and self-abasement) that it should never be lit up with consciousness again. Presently, however, the lips once more began to move.

'When will he be here?' he murmured; 'my time is short, Nannie.'

It was not the anxiety of his tone, nor even its plaintive tenderness, that overcame her, but the perfect confidence in her which it expressed.

So far from the thought having crossed his mind that his last request made to a loving wife could be denied to him, he had evidently concluded that it had been already carried into effect; unable to measure time, he doubtless imagined that in the brief interval that had elapsed between those feeble utterances of his, her orders had been given and a messenger despatched.

'Mr. Spenser will be here to-morrow, at farthest, my dear,' she answered assuringly.

'To-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow,' murmured the sick man, like the dying note of a funeral bell, and, as if soothed by that sad lullaby, he again relapsed into unconsciousness.

She rang the bell, and sent word for a horse to be saddled immediately; then sat down and wrote an urgent line to the Canon: and in ten minutes, with instruction to spare neither whip nor spur, the messenger was upon his way.

CHAPTER L.

MOTHER-IN-LAW AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW.

DEEP as was the apprehension with which Lady Trevor looked forward to the coming of Mr. Spenser, it was scarcely less terrible to her than the interval passed in the meanwhile in her daughter-in-law's society. Not a word fell from Clara's lips, either of indignation or reproach. Except for such necessary conversation as companionship demanded, she maintained a sort of frozen silence, from which her hostess could gather nothing. To others there was nothing noticeable in this: she only seemed to partake of the general gloom, for it was now understood that the master of the house was dying; but, as her hostess was well aware, she was not one to be tongue-tied by mere melancholy.

Lady Trevor tried, but tried in vain, to persuade herself that this silence arose from consideration for her own position. She knew that Clara's brow was dark, not with sorrow, but with anger, and that that anger was no longer concentrated on Hugh, but had extended to herself. To ask her for an explanation was beyond her courage; nay, she dared not even speculate upon the cause. Sir Richard grew worse and worse; his intervals of consciousness grew rarer and more brief; the words that his lips yet whispered were always the same words: 'When will Spenser come?'

Late on the second day the Canon arrived, and was received by Lady Trevor in her boudoir. She recognised him at once, though his brown hair had become white as snow, and the 'envious crow' had trodden about his eyes. The last time she had seen him he had placed his hand with professional benevolence upon her shapely head, and expressed a hope that my lady's favour was not turning it. She had been his pattern pupil in the village school.

He was a divine of the old school, and—whatever else might be wanting in him—a kind and courtly gentleman. As he pressed her fingers with tender sympathy with one hand, with the other he waved away her thanks for the promptness with which he had obeyed her summons.

'Though I make your first acquaintance to-day, Lady Trevor—

unhappily, under such sad circumstances—I am one of your husband's oldest friends. If I had had to come twice as far, I should have been equally willing. I am thankful indeed that I have arrived in time, and deeply touched by his wishing to bid me farewell.'

She led him to her husband's bedroom, and signed to him to enter it alone ; but before she had reached her own apartment the visitor came out again and called to her in a hushed voice. His face was solemn and full of sympathy : 'Alas!' he murmured, 'he is gone.' Then, taking her hand with a father's tenderness, he led her into the chamber of death, and left her.

How sad and strange it is that the full debt of human love is so often left unpaid, until too late ; that we delay to express how we have prized the jewel, till nothing but the casket remains to us ! What a waste seems that outpouring of passionate affection upon the inanimate body of our dear departed, which if bestowed upon him in life would have lightened and brightened it ! Lady Trevor herself never knew how she had loved her husband—and how much less, therefore, could *he* have known it—till she saw him dead before her. What had been amiss with him was all forgotten : she beheld the lover of her youth, but not the betrayer ; the tender and indulgent husband ; the faithful companion of her life, without whom it no longer seemed worth living. If a thought of the worthless rival who had robbed some of the affection that was *his* rightful due intruded on her now, it must have been a remorseful one indeed ; for but for him her Richard might have been still alive. But her mind dwelt upon the dead man's relations with herself alone ; as her husband, not as the father of her children. Her reflections were personal and yet unselfish ! she had no thought of self save in connection with him ; they were not two, but one ; and she would fain have died with him, as she had lived with him, and much more gladly.

On returning to her own room, however, the Present shut out the Past ; she could not be said to be herself again—for each minute she had passed beside that lost one had added a year to her age, and she knew she was old and broken—but the needs of her new position began to make themselves felt. She had been deprived of all that seemed dear to her on earth ; but her calamity might have been even still more complete ; she had at least preserved her secret, and whether Sir Richard had died before Mr. Spenser had entered the room, or if, as seemed more probable—for she had not left it five minutes, when he certainly was still alive—emotion at the sight of him had put out the last faint spark of life—he had died without sign. She could feel thankful that she had done her best to carry out his last wishes, and at the same time thankful that no harm had come

of them. The exposure of her shame had been spared her. Some self-congratulation, even in that hour of wretchedness, no doubt made itself apparent in her expressive face.

She was standing, lost in thought, by the window, when the door opened without noise, and the first notice she received of another's presence was given her in these pregnant words :

'So I see that you are safe, Lady Trevor.'

Stern and cold, and beautiful as a jealous Juno, her daughter-in-law stood confronting her. For the moment the wretched woman failed to perceive the full significance of the other's speech ; she only vaguely felt there was menace in it, and with an unconscious effort at self-defence, rather than with any designed idea of making appeal to her feelings, she exclaimed, 'My husband is dead, Clara !' and burst into tears.

A touch of pity, just the merest shade, but still a touch, crept into those threatening eyes ; but there was no grain of it in the tone of Clara's voice as she replied :

'I know it ; still, Lady Trevor, you are safe ; sit down.'

The permission, or command, was not superfluous ; and, trembling in every limb, the widow sank upon a couch, while Clara stood, with hand outstretched, like some avenging angel, and addressed her sternly :

'You think me brutal, doubtless, in such an hour as this, to come to you on any errand, save one of pity ; it may be you are right ; for I have suffered enough to make me brutal. Do not, therefore, blame me for it, madam, but *that hound*, your son.'

Here her eyes literally blazed with fury from the compulsion of alluding to one so hateful to her, and she paused a few moments as if to recover her self-control.

'Nothing, I admit, however, should excuse my intrusion on your privacy at such a time save the most urgent reason, or the most grievous wrong, and there is no need to tell you, madam, by which of these two motives I am actuated. In this very room, four months ago, you treacherously deceived me in the matter of your son's relations with Jenny Beeton. To gain your own ends you represented them as still existing, though your own hand had broken them off ; and would fain have persuaded me to give him up for ever. Would to Heaven you had succeeded, for instead of blaming the falseness of your tongue, I should now be blessing it, for having saved my life from blight and ruin. A few hours afterwards, in this very room, when I had discovered who you were, and, as I thought, all about you, you deceived me again, and with a cruelty with which woman has surely never before treated woman. To gain your own ends, which were then the exact opposite of what they had been before, you encouraged me, under the guise of frankness and of friendship, to wreck my future. On the

pretence of giving me your whole confidence, when in truth you gave me none, you made me your ally, and, for a reward, you permitted me to marry your bastard son. If you had thought that I loved him, there might have been some shadow of excuse for you; but in your heart you did not even give me credit for that regard which, incredible and monstrous as its existence now appears to me, I did at one time really entertain for his worthless self. I was about to marry him, as you concluded, solely for the prospects and position which you knew he had no more legal right to bestow than the poor poacher—your own brother—whom his mean malice has consigned to gaol. Doubtless you thought that even if the worst came to the worst—as it *has* come—if I should ever learn your shameful secret, that self-interest would seal my lips, and that I should bear the hateful yoke which your treachery had imposed upon me with meek endurance. You little knew me, Lady Trevor.'

She knew her now, at all events; no one could look upon that noble form, drawn up to its full height in wrath and scorn, that arm still outstretched as though it were made of iron, those eyes from which vengeance flashed like flaming fire, and believe she could be bent by any force to such a yoke. She continued, with bitter irony:

'You are curious, perhaps, to know how I found out your falsehood and your shame? It was your own son who revealed it to me!'

'My son!' With a sharp cry of agony and pain, Lady Trevor started from her seat. 'Is it possible, then, that Hugh knows all?'

'Not yet,' was the cold reply; 'that news must be reserved for my own telling; it is the one hour of joy which life has to give me, and no one, be sure, shall balk me of it. No, he does not know it, though it was from him I learnt it. He told me that his father had some hold upon him, and that until what has just occurred, he was compelled to be upon his best behaviour, that when he was gone, however, there would be no one, as he termed it, "to put the screw on him," and that you yourself—of whom he spoke with the contempt you merit—had told him so. Then I knew that you had told me only half your secret, and guessed, too late, the other half. I was not sure, however, and, as you will bear witness, I gave you the benefit of the doubt. When we came home I watched you narrowly, not without some hope that I might have been mistaken; but your every action, nay, your every word, now I had once the key that fitted them, convinced me of your guilt. When I bade you compel your son to spare his uncle, I knew that you could stop him if you pleased. But you spared yourself, and suffered him to complete his wrong. He shall wrong no one more, be sure; nor will *I* spare either you or him. Yes, upon the whole,

I am glad that the revelation, to make which I knew your dying husband had sent for Mr. Spenser, was never made to him. I read that in your face as I came in here—despite its widowed looks, there was a complacent satisfaction in it, misplaced, as you shall find. You thought your peril was past—your hateful son for ever free to trample upon all about him, and, above all, on me. From that idle dream I see I have awakened you.'

Lady Trevor had answered nothing to either threat or taunt. Her spirit was crushed within her. She wore the despairing look of some poor creature of the fields caught in a trap, 'who sees the trapper coming through the wood;' but, as the stream of her daughter-in-law's passionate reproaches seemed here to have ceased to flow, she inquired humbly:

'What is it you mean to do, Clara?'

'With *you?* Nothing,' was the cold response. 'To do you justice, you have a conscience that will sting you more than any lash from *my* whip. I am quite content—now that you know what I think of you—to leave you to it. But for that hound, your son, never did he treat dog as I will treat him.'

'Then how will he treat *me?*' groaned the wretched woman. 'Oh, Clara! think, oh, think what a scorpion's sting it must be to a mother to be reproached by her own offspring for his undoing!'

'I have thought of it, Lady Trevor, and it shall not be done,' was the unexpected rejoinder.

'What! Is it possible that you will not tell him? Oh, generous girl!' She threw herself upon her knees, and would have snatched and kissed the other's hands, but that with a quick movement she withdrew them out of reach.

'No, madam; you misunderstand me. I do pity you a little—more than I thought it possible a while ago; but, be assured, there is no shadow of weakness in my purpose. Your son must be told your story. Without that, where would be his punishment? How else could he be made to do justice, to make reparation, to act aright, despite his brutal impulses and the promptings of his wicked heart? Above all, where would be my revenge? Of course, he must be told; nor would I suffer my lips to be robbed of that precious morsel—the telling of it—for thrice his rent-roll. On the other hand, he shall never reproach his mother for her sin: first for your own sake, for I am a woman still, and cannot, despite my wrongs, harden my heart against you, as you, who had no wrongs, did against me; secondly, because I know it would gratify his vile and revengeful nature to taunt and curse you for his illegitimacy; and, with my will, he shall have no pleasures, good or bad.'

It was terrible and yet sublime to see her passion: the swan, says the poet, is 'born to be the only graceful shape of scorn,'

but if he could have seen Clara Trevor as she stood clothed in contemptuous fury, he would have admitted that there was another exception.

Yet of her two tyrants, Lady Trevor was compelled to own to herself, that the yoke of this woman—who had at least some compassion in her—would be preferable to the iron harrow of her pitiless son. The degradation of accepting her daughter-in-law's protection was, of course, unspeakable, but she had brought herself to that pass when even degradation, if it only promised safety, seemed almost welcome; and in Clara's hands she felt sure that, somehow, her secret would yet be safe. Of course, all depended upon Hugh's willingness to accept the terms, hard and bitter as they were sure to be, that his wife would offer to him; but what alternative had he but to accept them? His position, his birth, his wealth were his *raison d'être*, and made him all he was; without them he was as unsubstantial as a bubble. How could he withstand the demands, however imperious, of one who, though herself open to such material considerations by nature, had become, it was evident, through her wrong, absolutely indifferent to them, and who could with a word fling him down from his pedestal, and leave him landless, penniless, friendless, exposed to the jeers of a mocking world!

CHAPTER LI.

SUBMISSION.

SINCE it has been decided by the dramatic authorities that a lady should not be permitted to cut to pieces her children upon the stage, the same rule should, I suppose, apply when she performs the same operation upon her husband. The gentleness of woman and the sensitiveness of the married man alike shrink from the spectacle. Otherwise, I confess, there is a great temptation to lift the curtain, and disclose that shameful scene wherein Hugh Trevor was made to bite the dust, and, prostrate at the feet of the wife he had taught to hate him, took his punishment like the cur he was. To 'lick him into shape' was, as we know, impossible, and there was abundant excuse for licking him out of it. He was punished, indeed, to borrow the language of the police-court, 'beyond recognition.' Not one feature of his insolence and pride remained to him, nor was ever beheld in his evil face again. Never was lash laid on by tongue of judge on trembling felon with such bitter emphasis, nor sentence pronounced with more unfaltering severity. Of course, there was risk in it. Hugh might have said, 'Do your

worst ; but remember you are still my wife, and revenge at least is left to me.'

If such an alternative did cross his mind, there was certainly murder in it, and for once he resisted a desire—for behind it he saw the shadow of the gallows-tree. At all events, his submission was abject, immediate, and complete. So far as he himself was concerned, there was no difficulty in satisfying the claims of justice, and even of poetical justice. But as regarded his future position in relation to others, there were difficulties, indeed ; in the court of Honour (though that did not trouble him—he was out of its jurisdiction) they were prodigious, and in the eye of the Law insurmountable.

It could not be denied that Clara was making herself an accessory after the fact to her mother-in-law's fraud. The very title, indeed, which had now become her own, she had gained by fraud, though for the present she was robbing no one of it. So far, indeed, from its possession—to which her ambition had once looked forward with such eagerness — giving her any pleasure, she loathed it ; it scarred her brows like 'Luke's iron crown ;' but she was nevertheless compelled to wear it. This, however, was a small matter. Where Clara's dilemma lay was in the distribution of her husband's (supposed) fortune in such a manner as should meet the justice of the case as far as possible, without disclosing the secret of his birth. What it was her duty to do, upon the principle of *Fiat Justitia, ruat Cœlum*, there was no doubt; but it must be remembered that she was well convinced that the only person whom she was wronging, namely Charles Trevor, would, had he been acquainted with the circumstances, have very much preferred to be wronged than to have permitted that confession of his mother's shame which must have resulted from his getting his rights. It was indeed, as Clara persuaded herself, 'a charity' to keep him in ignorance of them. Fortunately for herself, she was a woman, and swayed by feeling much more than by principle ; but, even as it was, she suffered torture from the pangs of conscience. If it had been possible, she would have resigned any material advantage that had accrued to her from her marriage, and returned to her father's roof as penniless as she had left it. But the nature of her guilt admitted of no such easy sacrifice. There were two circumstances that smoothed for her the immense difficulties that beset her ; first, the craven submission of her husband to everything demanded of him ; and secondly, the easy-going and unbusiness like disposition of his younger brother. In the latter case, indeed, the danger lay in bestowing upon him so much of the all that was his due without arousing his suspicions. How was it possible to make him believe in the liberality of a brother with whose selfish and grasping nature he was well

acquainted, and from whom, on his father's death, he had, with only too much reason, looked for nothing, unless it were a notice to quit the parental roof?

What Clara's straits must have been may be concluded from the fact that the explanation of Hugh's conduct was found in the disclosure of a matter that every instinct of wifely pride would have urged her to conceal, namely, his hushed-up proposal to Jenny Beeton. It was not probable, indeed, that the discovery of any act of his past life, however shameful, should have placed such a husband as he at the mercy of his wife, or even made him willing to compensate her for his ill-doing, by any wholesale compliance with her wishes, but it was possible; and when we find ourselves suddenly overwhelmed by unexpected benefits, we are never very curious about the motives which have actuated the giver. That Clara was, however, indirectly the giver, and not Hugh, Charlie was well convinced, and if he could not be said to have received his good fortune like a bride, without 'amazement,' his surprise did not prevent his acceptance of it. Even his thanks to her—for, as to his brother, as will be seen, he never had the opportunity of thanking him—were necessarily of the briefest, since it was impossible to allude to the cause which was supposed to have rendered her good intentions practicable.

Another circumstance that assisted the Ladies Trevor (for there were now two of them) was the Dowager having Mr. Morris so completely under her thumb. It would have been difficult, indeed, to have made clear to the lawyer land-agent why his client, the new baronet, did not 'stick to' what had become his own by heirship, but made over so much of it to his brother Charles. It was necessary to make him to some extent their confidant, in order that certain legal arrangements should be duly executed; and just as under certain circumstances a forged bill is better security than a genuine one, he proved himself better adapted for their purpose (that is, more reticent and less inquiring) than an honest man would have been.

But after all was done to hoodwink the world at large, and give the appearance of naturalness to what was so contrary to general expectation, enough still remained unexplained, or insufficiently explained, to arouse astonishment. More than one Prince Hal has given up his evil ways on succeeding to his father's throne, and made a very tolerable king; but there was nothing, as everybody agreed, of the Prince Hal about Sir Hugh: no generous instinct, no hearty ways, no kindliness, no sense of right; and how it ever came about that his rule was so mild, and just, and liberal, was that Mystery of Mirbridge from which our story takes its name. A partial explanation of his good landlordism was, however, reasonably found in the fact that Sir

Hugh was an absentee, a circumstance which, at its inception at least, no one was surprised at, on account of the ill terms on which, as everyone knew, he was with his wife.

Immediately after his father's funeral he left England, ostensibly to make arrangements about some property which belonged to him near his old home in France, and in that country, under one pretext or another, he continued indefinitely to remain. Clara kept her promise that he should never be permitted to reproach his mother. Until her husband was buried, the widow kept close in her own apartments, where, with intense relief, she received the news from Clara that Hugh had gone. Her illusions with respect to him were at an end at last, but enough of tenderness remained for him to make her daughter-in-law as reticent to her about him as, for other reasons, she was to others. Never, probably, was the head of a family in his lifetime so completely ignored under his own roof as Sir Hugh Trevor. News came of him indirectly from time to time, generally in connection with a taste he had always had, but which had become greatly developed, for French brandy; but it excited very little interest, though, perhaps, in one breast, a secret hope. Considering the state of mind in which it may be conjectured he was, so full of rage and despair, and baffled expectation of evil-doing, it was probable enough the news was true; the one ground for congratulation for mankind that is associated with the curse of drink is that so many worthless people take to it, and rid us of their presence, in consequence, the sooner. By all but three persons in the world Hugh Trevor might be said to be forgotten; and by all but two—his wife and his Uncle John—forgiven. It is possible, if he had come back, so vehement was the hate the old poacher entertained for him, that he would have shot him, which would have been a terrible *dénouement* of the family secret, indeed. That catastrophe, at least, his unhappy mother was spared; but I venture to think she was punished enough for the sin of her youth, and the wrong-doing consequent upon its concealment. How complete had been the failure of all her fraud and falsehood! How worthless had that idol proved to be at whose shrine she had sacrificed in vain her self-respect! Not even now was she at peace, for who could be sure that in some fit of drunkenness Hugh might not blurt out his story, or even, mad with drink and rage, return home to tell it?

Still, as time went on, life became more endurable to her than it had been. The tendrils of maternal love, so rudely torn away from their first hold, gradually attached themselves to a more worthy object, her second son; while in Lucy, whom she had always regarded with tenderness, she found, even before the girl became Charlie's bride, a loving daughter. With Clara, too, her relations, though at first a little strained, were not un-

pleasant. The two women had too many faults, or rather flaws, of character in common, not to thoroughly understand one another; and Clara, generous by nature, showed herself kind, as well as conciliatory. It may be said that the practical character of the young lady had something to do with this; for it was only to be expected that she would make the best of a bad job, and not cry over spilt milk. But, as a matter of fact, her misfortune was too great to admit of any considerations of that nature. Strange as it may seem, she felt the humiliation of her position even more than did the elder woman; and that it was not known to others was her sole consolation. She grew in time to like her mother-in-law for her own sake, but the possession of their common secret was, of course, the bond that drew her most closely to her. What an end—if, indeed, the worst had yet happened to her—had come of her scheme of life and its low ambitions! How useless was now the beauty with which she had held men in thrall, and thought to win her way with!

If happiness was not to be her own, however, she at least found solace in promoting the happiness of others. What Lucy had been to the poor folks at Mirbridge, Clara became—though, of course, with a difference. She had not Lucy's winning smile and gracious ways. A sort of tender melancholy took the place of her old haughtiness, though a smile—the last relic of her old cynicism—would sometimes cross her lips at the reflection that she was learning the true lesson of life from the sister whose ignorance she had despised.

CHAPTER LII.

POSTSCRIPT.

THERE was now no reason, as regarded any deficiency of means, why Charles and Lucy should not become man and wife; while the absence of his brother made his remaining at Mirbridge almost a necessity for the transaction of affairs in connection with the estate. Lucy, always a home-lover, was well pleased at the prospect of being at the Court, and had none of the usual misgivings about getting on with her mother-in-law; and, a few months after Sir Richard's death, they were married.

Mrs. Westrop was very indignant with Charles Trevor for despising her heiress, and reproached that young lady for having played her cards so badly; while Lady Joddrell was still more angry with Lucy for having played them so well. No one could ever persuade her that that young lady had not been cognizant all along of the real nature of her husband's expectations; though at the same time, with some lack of logic, she attributed to Clara's astuteness the ample manner in which her sister had

been provided for. If she had known the actual facts of the case, and had been permitted to tell them, it would probably have given her a greater pleasure than she had ever experienced in her life ; but this bliss was denied her.

Sir Hugh was not at the wedding, which was almost as quiet a one as his own ; and I am afraid he even forgot to send the young couple a marriage present. From a material point of view, this was, however, of the less consequence, since it was made up to them by a *cadeau* from Miss Mumchance, equal in value to a gross of ordinary gifts. As Charles observed to his bride, when the diamonds first flashed upon her astonished gaze, 'Why, my dear, if we had had nothing else, we might have married on *that*.' Moreover, they had the satisfaction of knowing that, unlike the usual procedure in such cases, the present would have been just as costly if they had been as poor as Job, and stood in the same need of it. Mr. Gurdon's gift was of a much humbler kind, but caused even a greater excitement. It was a picture as large as the famous (or infamous) Romney, painted by his own hand, of Miss Mumchance herself, which, as a memorial of so warm a friend, he ventured to express a hope would not be unacceptable. The recipients exchanged very significant glances over it, and one of them winked.

'She must have sat a good many times to him,' observed Lucy, 'to have produced so complete a likeness.'

'Yes, and it is probable he will have many opportunities of taking her again,' was Charlie's dry rejoinder ; whereupon they both burst into a shout of laughter. Young people in their happy position will do so upon very slight provocation, but to judge from what happened subsequently, to the amazement of all who enjoyed Mr. Gurdon's acquaintance, there was really some ground for mirth in their case. Confirmed bachelors—at all events, when they are under thirty—do not always marry their cooks. What Mrs. Westrop said about *that* I leave to the imagination of the reader ; her friends at Mirbridge, it cannot be denied, gave her a great deal to talk about, and she ought to have been grateful to them.

When Charles and Lucy went to live at the Court, Clara returned to her old home, and dwelt with her parents.

'I can never make up to you,' she said to them very gently, and in what Mr. Gurdon used professionally to describe as her 'later manner,' 'for the daughter you have lost, but at all events I can promise that you will find me of more service than I used to be ;' and she kept her word. She was never Lucy, but she proved herself much more adapted for home consumption than the Clara of old : a more wholesome, dutiful, loving daughter—though always with a tinge of melancholy—it would have been difficult to find.

'I really can't understand,' observed Mrs. Westrop to Charles Trevor, 'what has come over that grass-widow of yours'—by which, of course, she meant his brother's.

Even when, after a few years, French brandy accomplished its beneficent work, and she became a real widow, her enfranchisement effected little change in her. She certainly grew more cheerful—as well she might with that weight of apprehension removed from her shoulders—but her behaviour still continued to be what the neighbourhood called 'peculiar.' With respect to one of her 'fancies' they even used a harsher term, and indeed—without reference to the ambition that had characterized her of old—it was a thing inexplicable to them. For what woman having once acquired a handle—by hook or by crook—to her name has ever been known to part with it? Yet this is what the second Lady Trevor did upon her sister's succeeding to the title. That there should be three Lady Trevors in Mirbridge (like the three Kings of Brentford) she denounced as an absurdity, as well as leading to endless misunderstandings and mistakes; and from henceforth declined to be addressed by that name. To the world at large this appeared at best an eccentricity; at worst, the pride that apes humility; but there was one person who recognised and appreciated her motive. It was the stripping off (she knew) of the last falsehood that clung to her. Clara was, it is true, still in receipt of a small jointure, but almost the whole of this she saved to be in the end returned to its rightful owners. If Mrs. Hugh Trevor still had her detractors, it was in those who accused her of a vice so foreign to her old character that its existence formed an item of itself in the Mystery of Mirbridge—that of being a little over-careful in money matters. With that insignificant exception, the page of Clara's wrong-doing was closed.

To Lady Trevor the elder, too, though her crime had been far more grave, it was permitted—now that no further catastrophes were to be feared—to feel lightened of her burthen. It seems strange enough, and yet perhaps only illustrates the invariable futility of evil-doing, that the death of him for the love of whom she had sacrificed her peace of mind brought her safety at last; nor will it be grudged her, that for the first time for a quarter of a century she was enabled to breathe freely.

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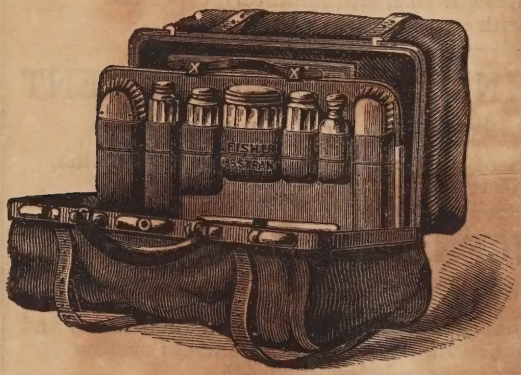

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